

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: Kochimo

VOLUME
19





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It was Rimee Ruu, bounding over like a little bunny right toward Tara.

“Hey there! Welcome to the Ruu settlement!”

“You really came! It’s like I’m dreaming!”

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“What’s with that look? If you have something to say, then out with it already.”

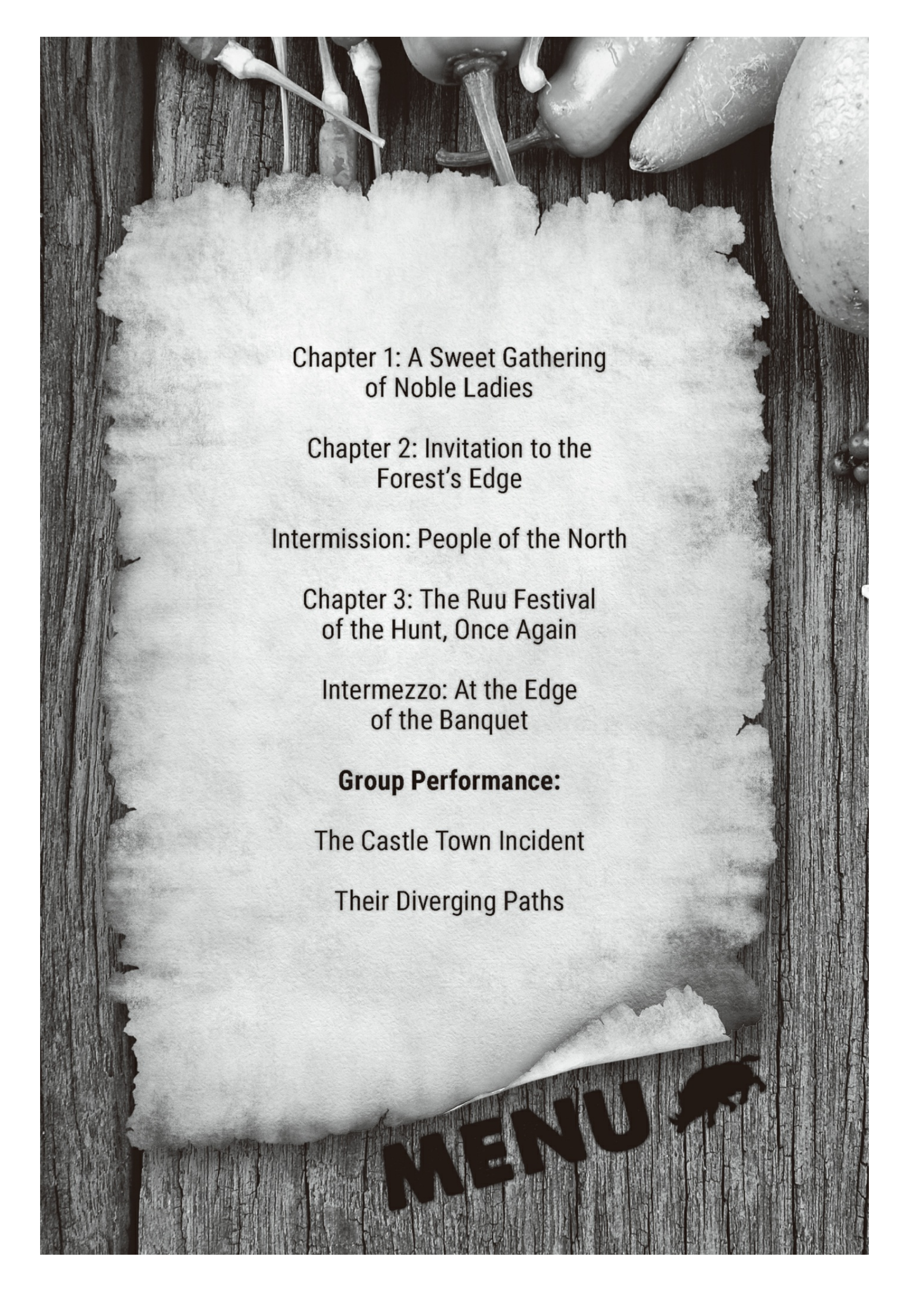
Ai Fa was standing there clad in the same sort of white military attire as Shin Ruu.

“You look very natural, Asuta. But I’m sure I look like an utter fool, right?”

“Don’t
stare at
me like
that. It’s
rude.”

Her frame was long
and slender, her waist
was tight, and she
had no excess fat on
her whatsoever. She
was both elegant and
strong—the perfect
image of a female
hunter.





Chapter 1: A Sweet Gathering
of Noble Ladies

Chapter 2: Invitation to the
Forest's Edge

Intermission: People of the North

Chapter 3: The Ruu Festival
of the Hunt, Once Again

Intermezzo: At the Edge
of the Banquet

Group Performance:

The Castle Town Incident

Their Diverging Paths

MENU





Character Introductions



~ People of the Forest's Edge ~

	Asuta Tsurumi A chef-in-training born in Japan. Though he remembers losing his life in a fire, some strange power led him to another world.		Ai Fa The only female hunter at the forest's edge. She seems calm and composed at a glance, but hides strong emotions inside. She has made the decision to welcome Asuta into the Fa clan.
	Donda Ruu The head of the Ruu clan, and one of the three leading clan heads of the forest's edge. An exceedingly skilled hunter. He injured his right shoulder in the battle with the lord of the forest.		Jiza Ruu The eldest son of the main Ruu house. He has a strict personality and highly values the laws of the forest's edge.
	Ludo Ruu The youngest son of the main Ruu house. Mischievous by nature. A stronger hunter than most.		Lala Ruu The third daughter of the main Ruu house. A frank girl who has feelings toward Shin Ruu.
	Rimee Ruu The youngest Ruu daughter. An earnest, innocent child. She adores Ai Fa and Tara.		Shin Ruu The eldest son of a Ruu branch house who recently became the head of his family. Sheera Ruu is his elder sister.
	Dan Rutim The former head of the Rutim clan. He possesses uncommon strength as a hunter, but is currently recovering from an injury to his left leg.		Gazraan Rutim The head of the Rutim clan. A calm-natured man with undeniable wisdom. Also a peerless friend to Asuta.
	Rau Lea The Lea clan head. A hunter with delicate looks but a fierce nature.		Toor Deen Originally belonged to a Suun branch house. She is introverted by nature, but she gives her all to assist Asuta with his business.
	Lem Dom The younger sister of the head of the Dom clan. Because she wishes to be a hunter, she has left home and is currently living in a vacant house near the Fa clan.	Saris Ran Fou A member of the Fou clan, which is located near the Fa house. Ai Fa's childhood friend, and the mother of a single child.	

~ Townsfolk ~

	Diel The daughter of a metalworker from Jagar. She has a boyish appearance and a frank, earnest personality.		Arishuna Ji Mafraluda A fortune teller of eastern heritage. Currently, she is staying in the castle town as a guest of Duke Genos.
	Lefreya The girl who inherited the house of Turan from the criminal Cyclopeus. In repentance for her past crimes, she now lives a quiet life.		Sanjura Lefreya's attendant, and a skilled swordsman. He has mixed blood from the east and west. Though he is a gentle man, his true nature is difficult to grasp.
Eulifia The wife of the first son of Duke Genos. Though she is a noblewoman with an elegant air about her, she is cheerful and not reserved in the least.		Yang The head chef of the house of Daleim. Currently, he is working hard to promote the flow of new ingredients into the post town.	
Sheila A maid employed by the house of Daleim. She met Ai Fa when Asuta was kidnapped by Lefreya.		Nicola A maid employed by the house of Daleim. Alongside Sheila, she assists Yang in his work.	
Shilly Rou An apprentice of the master chef Varkas. A strong-willed seventeen-year-old girl with a powerful sense of rivalry toward Asuta.			Tara Dora's daughter. Eight years old. She is becoming close with Rimee Ruu, who is around her age.
Dora A citizen of the Daleim part of the Genos domain. He sells produce in the post town.			Myme Mikel's daughter. Following in her father's footsteps, she puts a great deal of effort into improving her cooking skills.
	Mikel A former chef from the castle town. Due to a crippling injury inflicted on his right hand, he lost his ability to cook professionally.		Yumi The daughter of the owners of an inn called The Westerly Wind. Friendly and cheerful. Sixteen years old.
	Milano Mas The owner of the inn known as The Kimyuu's Tail. A stubborn man with a strong sense of duty.	Telia Mas Milano Mas's daughter. Though she was afraid of the people of the forest's edge, she has been opening up bit by bit thanks to her interactions with Asuta and the others.	

~ Group Performance ~

	Kamyua Yoshu A skilled swordsman with mixed blood from the north and the west. He works as a bodyguard, but is currently no longer in Genos.		Leito Kamyua Yoshu's apprentice. Though he is only eleven years old, he has a level of maturity one wouldn't expect from someone his age.
Polarth The second son of the house of Daleim. He is working on a plan to make Genos into a town filled with delicious food.		Reina Ubukata Asuta's childhood friend from when he lived in Japan.	

Chapter 1: A Sweet Gathering of Noble Ladies

1

After the calamity surrounding the Sauti settlement brought about by the lord of the forest had come to a close, we all returned to our everyday lives.

The Ruu clan's chefs had been alternating who lodged at the Sauti settlement every other day, but for everyone else it had been a four-day stay. However, considering that they'd taken down a target as terrifyingly powerful as the lord of the forest in such a short amount of time, it actually felt rather quick.

On the other hand, Ai Fa, Donda Ruu, and Darmu Ruu had suffered serious injuries, but all of them would be able to recover with rest, which was something of a relief. We had to give our thanks to the mother forest that the lord was defeated without anyone losing their life.

Looking beyond our sadness for our injured comrades, we gained a great many things from the experience. Primarily, there was the pride of having defeated the mighty lord of the forest, as well as the bonds that were starting to flourish between the various clans.

It had taken the unified strength of numerous clans in order to bring down the lord of the forest. Though the people of the forest's edge tended to value blood ties above all else and didn't have much to do with clans with which they lacked such bonds, they had lent their aid in order to save the Sauti from their dilemma.

To establish our business in the post town, the Fa clan had taken the initiative in deepening our bonds with a variety of clans. If the Sauti could also keep forming new connections as well, things would definitely go better for them.

With all that having played out, the third day of the violet month had arrived. The lord of the forest had been defeated on the final day of the indigo month, the thirty-first, so it was now three days later.

Since we had temporarily closed for business on the first of the violet month, this was our second day with the stalls open again. Everything was proceeding the same as always, but one member of our group seemed to be acting differently than usual.

“What’s the matter? Did something happen? You’ve seemed down all morning,” I asked Toor Deen, who was working the stall alongside me.

As she set a fresh steaming basket of giba manju on the pot, Toor Deen replied, “No,” with a shake of her head. “It’s nothing all that serious. Please, don’t waste your worry on someone like me.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. There’s no way I could just ignore you looking down in the dumps.” I stole a look down at her face, as she was about a head shorter than me. “Well, it’s possible someone like me won’t be able to do much to help, but maybe talking about it will make you feel better. As long as you’re okay with it, I’m willing to discuss anything you need.”

Toor Deen listlessly stared back at me. At least she wasn’t tearing up, but she still looked just about ready to cry. No, there was no way I could ignore her like she’d asked.

“You see...the clan head chewed me out yesterday.”

“The head of the Deen did? But why?”

“Well... I got scolded for making a poor dish and wasting valuable ingredients...”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re seriously saying you made something that bad?”

I knew better than anyone how skilled Toor Deen was, and besides, three days ago she had been giving her all to aid the Sauti along with the rest of us. She had finally returned home the day before yesterday, and she said her clan members had all shown appreciation for her efforts, which had made her incredibly happy.

Toor Deen had originally been a member of a Suun branch house. Considering her personality, she had undoubtedly felt quite overwhelmed when faced with the task of living a proper life in order for her crimes to be forgiven.

But she had trained her cooking skills through the Fa clan and finally reached the point where she was entrusted to man the stove for a wedding at the northern settlement, and she was currently earning a great deal of wealth for the Deen clan by assisting with work in the post town. On top of that, she had even returned with a thighbone from the lord of the forest for the help she'd provided the Sauti clan. By this point, she should've been living with pride and joy even when among the Deen clan rather than worrying about bringing them shame. Or at least I thought so.

I had met the Deen clan head before, at least in passing. Though the clan had once fallen under the Suun, they were located so far away that they weren't deeply involved with the former leading clan or the clans of the north, and should have been more like the Fou and Ran in how they lived austere yet earnest lives, fitting for people of the forest's edge. I just couldn't imagine the Deen clan head scolding Toor Deen over some minor failure.

"Hmm, what's that all about? Could it be some sort of misunderstanding?"

"It can't be. All the men felt the same way as our clan head. They said that it was just awful... I feel terrible, after everything you taught me..."

"This is sounding more and more odd. I just can't imagine you making such a poor dish. What exactly did you make for them?"

"I...I mixed poitan with sugar..." Toor Deen replied, tearing up a bit.

A new customer approached at that point which got me a bit flustered, but Yamiru Lea seamlessly offered her support from the neighboring stall. She moved around us, grabbed a piping hot giba manju out of the steaming basket, and handed it over to the customer.

The glance Yamiru Lea shot me seemed to say, "Hurry up and do something about this." Despite appearances, she was trying to look after Toor Deen, her former relative.

While feeling grateful for Yamiru Lea's kindness, I led Toor Deen around to the rear of the stall.

As the young girl kept on sobbing, she continued, "The other women manning the stove with me were happy with it, so I decided to serve it for dinner...but it

must not have been a dish that was suitable for hunters. I felt so pathetic as the one who was supposed to grant them their life for the day...”

“H-Hold on, Toor Deen. Come on, wipe away your tears.”

“I’m sorry...”

Toor Deen deeply hung her head as she wiped her tears with the hand towel I gave her. Though she was one of the leading chefs of the forest’s edge, she was still only ten years old. And she was especially sensitive for a member of her people, so it pained me to see those tears streaming down her face.

“Could you tell me about it in a bit more detail? Did you just add sugar into the poitan?”

“No... I used karon milk to dissolve the poitan. Then to improve the flavor and texture I mixed in milk fat and kimyuus egg... Oh, and I used a bit of dried ramam fruit too...”

Ramam was a sweet fruit that was a lot like an apple. I used it as a subtle flavoring in my giba curry, but my experience with the dried fruit only went as far as sampling it while I was out shopping.

“Hmm... From what you’re saying, it sounds delicious. But I’d imagine it would be better suited as a dessert.”

“A dessert?”

“Yeah, like a sweet. You’ve had some during study sessions and at the dinner party in the castle town, right? The thing that’s served last when you prepare six dishes.”

Milk, milk fat, and egg were the same ingredients I used in the hotcakes and donuts I had presented to Lefreya. The only difference was that she had used poitan rather than fuwano. I had previously presented chatchi mochi and steamed pudding for dinner parties, but western-style baked sweets had yet to be introduced at the forest’s edge. That chef from the castle town, Varkas, had prepared meringue cookies made using egg for his dessert, so it wasn’t as if the idea would have come from him either.

“So you came up with that dish all on your own, Toor Deen? To be honest, a

lot of sweets from back in my home country used those ingredients.”

“Is that so? I just aimed to make a dish I found delicious, the same as always... But even though sugar and milk fat are expensive ingredients, it still ended up being no good...”

“No, the issue must have been with how it paired with the other dishes. I suspect it wouldn’t be well suited to being eaten alongside meat and soup dishes... And the people of the forest’s edge have no sugar or sweet fruit in their customary diet to begin with, so it could be that they just tend to be a little averse to sweet tastes in general.” Before Toor Deen could start crying again, I hastily continued, “But they accepted sweet sauces using fruit wine quickly enough, and nobody has complained about mixing tau oil and sugar, right? So I think the main issue must be the balance between it and the other dishes. If you bring the sweets out after the rest of the meal like they do for dinner parties in the castle town, I’m sure the men would find them tasty too.”

“You really think so?”

“I’m sure of it. Now that I think about it, Rimee Ruu loved the chatchi mochi and steamed pudding, and has apparently been making them when she’s on cooking duty.”

Unfortunately, it was Sheera and Lala Ruu who were working in the post town today. And the Ruu clan members were busy running their outdoor restaurant anyway, so they wouldn’t have the time to casually chat with us regardless.

“Okay, when we make it back to the Ruu settlement, could I taste the dish you made? We could summon Rimee Ruu and have her give it a try too. Then we can figure out for sure whether or not the issue is with the taste.”

“Right...” Toor Deen replied, lifting her tear-stained face.

The young chef had undoubtedly prepared that sweet poitan dish wishing to bring joy to the people living alongside her. How sad she must have been to be scolded for making something “awful.” I didn’t think the Deen clan head and the others were truly at fault, but I also couldn’t let things stand as they were.

Toor Deen finally made a place for herself after being taken away from the Suun clan. I can’t let something like this mess it up, I thought to myself.

Then I heard Yamiru Lea call out from the stall, “Asuta, are you done now? There’s a visitor here for you.”

“Huh? A visitor for me?”

I encouraged Toor Deen to follow me back to the stall, where I found a familiar young woman deeply bowing her head.

“My most sincere apologies for intruding during such a busy time. I am Sheila, a maid for the house of Daleim.”

“Sheila...? Ah right, you’ve been helping Yang at Tanto’s Blessing and his stall, right? It’s been a while.”

“I am truly honored that you remembered someone of my station.”

Though she was dressed plainly so as not to attract attention from the ruffians around the post town, her movements and manner of speaking were highly refined. Her dark brown hair was long, and she looked to be around my age. Apparently, she had met Ai Fa back when I had been kidnapped by Lefreya, and she had helped out a lot back then.

“I have come here today in order to deliver a message from Lord Polarth. Do you mind if I convey it here and now?”

“Yeah, go right ahead.”

“Thank you. An invitation to the castle town has been extended to you, Sir Asuta.”

I figured some sort of new ingredients must have been delivered from somewhere, but instead it turned out to be a request for my cooking skills. And it didn’t come from Polarth, but rather Lady Eulifia, the wife of Duke Genos’s first son, Melfried. I had only met her once before, when I manned the kitchen alongside the skilled chef Varkas for a banquet welcoming the envoys from Banarm. In his roles as the head of the ducal guard and the arbitrator for the people of the forest’s edge, Melfried was a cool-headed and quiet man, but his wife, while graceful, gave off a rather wild impression.

“It will be a light meal for a gathering of noble ladies at The White Bird in the castle town, held on the seventh of the violet month.”

“A gathering of noble ladies? And a light meal rather than a dinner? So is it something like a tea party?”

“Yes, that is precisely the case. They will be expecting sweets rather than meat or vegetable dishes.”

I was left a little dumbfounded by the topic of sweets coming up again so soon. It felt like some sort of cruel prank by the goddess of fate.

“Hmm, but sweets fall outside of my field of expertise. I’m a little concerned about whether I’ll be able to live up to the expectations of those noble ladies... And the seventh of the violet month is a normal business day for us. Since tomorrow is a day off, we’ll be working from the fifth through the tenth of the violet month.”

“I was simply tasked with delivering this message, so I can offer you no response... But the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge should also be receiving an official request around now.”

That made sense. After all, if folks from the castle wanted to hire people of the forest’s edge, they needed to first go through the leading clan heads.

“Hmm...” This request could be an even higher hurdle for me to clear than being asked to man the kitchen for a dinner party, though.

Sheila glanced around the area and then whispered into my ear, “There is an additional message provided personally by Lord Polarth... It seems a great many noble personages in the castle town desire your cooking at present. Duke Genos is restricting their requests, as he feels it improper to interfere with the lives of you people of the forest’s edge unnecessarily... However, Lady Eulifia is the one and only person whom the duke is unable to hold back.”

As I recalled Eulifia’s cheerful smile, I nodded. “I see.” It was true that I could recall Duke Marstein Genos looking rather troubled by her speech and conduct back at the welcome banquet.

“She wished to have you handle a larger dinner party originally, but she was somehow talked down to a tea party instead. Lord Polarth said that he apologizes, but he would like you to make some time to fulfill Lady Eulifia’s curiosity.”

“Polarth and Duke Genos are both trying to do right by us people of the forest’s edge, aren’t they? I certainly understand that much... I really do. I’ll discuss the matter with the leading clan heads and give it some serious consideration.”

“We are in your debt.”

Looking somewhat relieved, Sheila stepped back.

Then, suddenly, her cheeks went red and she started fiddling with her apron.

“Also, well...if you happen to accept this job, Sir Asuta, would Lady Ai Fa be accompanying you?”

“Ai Fa? Yeah, I’d imagine she probably would.” It had been three days now since the lord of the forest had been taken down. Even with her broken ribs, Ai Fa had been moving around fairly freely yesterday and was complaining about being bored, so if I were to tell her about this, she would undoubtedly volunteer herself for guard duty.

I was somewhat worried about that, but for whatever reason, Sheila’s eyes sparkled as she replied, “I see. Sir Yang has been invited as well, so I was planning on accompanying him. Please, give my regards to Lady Ai Fa as well.”

“Right, got it.”

As I saw Sheila off with a smile, I thought with a sigh, *What was that about?*

2

“Ah, welcome back, everybody!”

Once we were finished with our business in the post town, we headed back to the Ruu settlement, where we found a rather large crowd of women awaiting us in the kitchen. Since tomorrow was a day off, we didn’t need to handle preparations, so I wasn’t sure what this was all about. It was still bright out, but they seemed to already have their preparations for dinner mostly finished.

From among the group, it was once again Rimee Ruu who energetically greeted us with a smile.

“Since we haven’t been catching many giba lately, there hasn’t been much tanning to do. And with all the firewood chopped up, everyone decided to work on dinner!”

“I see,” I replied, satisfied with that answer.

There were two reasons they were catching fewer giba around the Ruu settlement. The first was that there were simply fewer of the beasts in the clan’s hunting grounds as their next break period was approaching, and the second was the fact that both Donda and Darmu Ruu were resting up from their injuries.

In the kitchen there were four Ruu women and two guests working away. Somewhat unusually, Sati Lea Ruu was there too, working alongside Vina, Reina, and Rimee Ruu.

Sati Lea Ruu was the wife of the eldest son of the main Ruu house, Jiza Ruu. She was a very wise and attentive woman, but she had to look after her young child Kota Ruu, so she tended to man the stove less often than the other women.

After giving her a brief greeting, I turned back to Rimee Ruu.

“I’m glad to see you here, Rimee Ruu. Could you participate in today’s study session?”

“Yeah, I will! What are we learning today?”

“Something that I’m sure you’ll enjoy.”

As we talked, the two women there as guests approached us.

“Asuta of the Fa clan, would it be all right if we also participated in today’s study session?”

“Yeah, of course.”

They were the Zaza women who were staying at the Ruu settlement.

Currently, they were on exchange with some women from under the Ruu so that the Zaza clan could learn how to make delicious meals. From the Ruu side, the youngest daughter of the main Rutim house, Morun Rutim, and a woman from a Ruu branch house had been dispatched, while these two had come from

the Zaza clan.

One of them was an older woman by the name of Mei Jeen Zaza. She was the younger sister of the clan head of the Jeen, a clan that fell under the Zaza, and was married to the younger brother of the leading clan head Gulaf Zaza. She was moderately tall but had a sturdy build, and she had as much of a presence about her as Mia Lea Ruu.

The other was a sixteen-year-old unmarried woman named Sufira Zaza. She was the youngest daughter of the main Zaza house, making her Gulaf Zaza's daughter. Slender and tall, her long blackish-brown hair was draped over her right shoulder in a large braid. Just from looking at her, it really was hard to believe that she was even younger than Reina Ruu.

Like Lem Dom, who also came from the north, they had giba bone accessories. These two also wore giba leather over their chests and waists on top of the usual attire with swirling patterns that were worn by f the people of the forest's edge. Though they didn't look especially wild, there was a sharp look in their eyes and the expressions on their faces were pretty intense, which gave them a strong presence. That seemed fitting for women from the northern settlement, who were known to be dauntless.

"Well then, could you show us your skills, Toor Deen?" I asked when the preparations for dinner were just about finished.

A bit timidly, Toor Deen replied, "Okay..." and started picking out ingredients.

Our town group added eight people to the six who were already there, making for quite the packed kitchen. With eyes that kept glancing at the crowd around her, Toor Deen silently got to work.

She started by dissolving poitan flour in karon milk, then she added milk fat and kimyuus egg. Next, she tossed in some sugar and checked the flavor, after which she grabbed the dried ramam.

Ramam had a yellow surface and red interior. They were shriveled like dried persimmons, and after chopping them up, she dropped them into the batter.

As poitan was less sticky than fuwano, the batter was in more of a gooey liquid state. Toor Deen whipped it with a wooden spatula, then dropped it onto

a metal tray coated with milk fat in a round hotcake-like shape.

Since she had used kimyuus eggs, it had a bit of a yellow color to it. In terms of appearance, it wasn't much different from the hotcakes I had prepared before.

"Mm, what a great smell! I'm sure it'll be delicious!" Rimee Ruu said with great delight as she stared down at Toor Deen's hands.

However, the young chef's expression remained completely serious. She flipped her creation over, revealing a brown grilled color that was even more reminiscent of hotcakes.

"It's ready."

The poitan hotcake was around thirty centimeters in diameter, and Toor Deen skillfully transferred it to a plate without damaging it.

As she cut into it, I thought, *Oh?* for the first time. The knife passed through with shocking ease.

Now that I thought about it, the hotcake had risen quite a bit, from an original thickness of about one centimeter to around three times that. Perhaps whipping it had even more of an impact than I had expected.

"Please, go ahead and try some..." Toor Deen said, stepping back with a deeply worried expression.

We all reached out for the small plates the hotcake had been divided among.

Milk fat was akin to a fine butter and had a wonderful aroma. From what I could see of the cross section of the hotcake, the inside looked soft and moist, with bits of red ramam fruit here and there throughout.

Each of us only had a very small portion, so I went ahead and popped the whole thing into my mouth. I instantly felt a gentle aroma waft up through my nose. Sure enough, the taste was similar to that of a hotcake. However, the texture differed. It was moist and seemed to melt lightly in my mouth. It had to have a lot more air mixed in than the hotcakes I made. With the light smoothness, it definitely had a pleasant texture to it.

The ramam added a perfect accent to the dish. The bits of fruit were springy

when heated through, and their tart sweetness seeped into the dish, blending splendidly with the pure sweetness from the sugar and the milk fat. In terms of both taste and texture, the ramam was making the whole dish much more enjoyable.

“Yeah, this is great,” I said as I glanced around, only to freeze in place. A number of the women were breathing heavily and looking enraptured.

Foremost among them were Rimee Ruu, Yun Sudra, Sati Lea Ruu, and Sufira Zaza. Everyone else seemed generally satisfied, but those four wore expressions of supreme bliss. Meanwhile, Reina and Sheera Ruu looked pretty serious as they carefully sampled the taste, and Vina Ruu was glancing around with just as much bewilderment as I was.

“What’s going on with all of you? Something just changed in your eyes...” the eldest sister said.

“You have to ask?! This is super tasty!” Rimee Ruu exclaimed as she tossed aside her plate and clung to Toor Deen’s arm. “This is the first time I’ve ever had such delicious poitan! Did you think up this dish all on your own, Toor Deen?!”

“Huh? Ah, yes, well...” Toor Deen answered with a flustered smile.

Then Yun Sudra grabbed onto the young chef’s other arm. “I agree! I thought I knew how skilled of a chef you are...but this leaves me at a loss for words!”

Thinking about it, I could remember Yun Sudra saying she had been warned not to use too much sugar back at her house. She must have had a sweet tooth just like Rimee Ruu.

Sati Lea Ruu stood calmly right in front of poor Toor Deen. “This is certainly an unusual texture. It’s as if the okonomiyaki Asuta taught us how to prepare before was made sweeter, yet it also has an entirely different sort of deliciousness to it.”

I recalled then that Sati Lea Ruu was exceedingly fond of carbs. Though she was smiling gently as usual, her eyes were shining just as brightly as Rimee Ruu’s or Yun Sudra’s.

Sufira Zaza, who I wasn’t all that familiar with, also crowded in close, leaving Toor Deen surrounded. Her eyes were narrowed in bliss as she tasted the

hotcake-style poitan.

As she looked over those four, Vina Ruu gave a shrug of her seductive shoulders. “I thought it was plenty good too, but it seems to have had much more of an impact on them... Is it the same sort of dish Asuta prepared before with fuwano, sugar, and herbs?”

“Yeah, that’s right. There are certainly big differences between them, but I’d say they’re in the same family.”

She was referring to back when I was still developing the giba curry. In order to explain the importance of herbs, I’d combined one that was similar to cinnamon with sugar and fuwano. Toor Deen might have gotten the idea to use kimyuus eggs from the way I used it in okonomiyaki and pasta, but aside from that, she had come up with everything on her own.

Wondering what Reina and Sheera Ruu were thinking, I glanced over their way. “I’m sure everyone who went to the castle town can tell, but I believe this should be treated as a sweet to be eaten after dinner rather than as an ordinary dish. So keeping that in mind, what are your thoughts?” I asked.

Reina Ruu gave her opinion first. “Well, I think it’s very tasty. Varkas didn’t seem to have put much effort into his dessert, but this... I think it’s every bit as good as the sweets you and he made, Asuta.”

I nodded. “Yeah, sweets are outside of my field of expertise. And Varkas seemed to think the dessert shouldn’t stand out too much as the conclusion of a six-course meal, but it may be a bit different when you’re making one all on its own. At any rate, I’m a little surprised that Toor Deen could make one this delicious without any proper knowledge of the subject.”

Toor Deen looked moved to the point of tears as she stood there with Rimee Ruu and Yun Sudra holding her arms. Naturally, these tears were an entirely different sort from the ones she had wept earlier in the day, though.

3

“Well then, I’ll cook next!” Rimee Ruu proclaimed as she darted over to the pantry, then returned with the ingredients she needed. She had taken the

initiative when I'd asked what sort of sweets they ate in the Ruu clan.

"There isn't much time, so I'll make chatchi mochi instead of pudding! I've started using karon milk lately instead of water!"

"Ooh, that sounds tasty."

Chatchi mochi was a simple sweet akin to warabimochi that I had prepared for the dinner party in the castle town. The name came from how it used (what I believed to be) starch extracted from chatchi, which were like potatoes. I had come up with it based on the potato starch mochi my mother had made when I was young.

Though it took some time to extract the starch from chatchi, the steps after that were simple. You boiled the chatchi starch with sugar in water, and once that cooled off, it was good to go. But Rimee Ruu boiled it in karon milk rather than water.

On top of that, she added two additional ingredients alongside the sugar: crushed ramanpa nuts that reminded me of peanuts, and a powdered version of that cinnamon-like herb.

"It's real tasty if you pour that sweet panam honey stuff over the top too, but Mama Mia Lea said it's expensive so I shouldn't use too much. That's why I added lots of sugar instead!"

Since I had aimed for something like the glaze on mitarashi dango for flavor when I made them, I hadn't added too much sugar to the mochi themselves.

Once the chatchi mochi cooked enough, she added it to a pot of water, and as soon as it solidified she started tearing bits off in the appropriate sizes. Before long, there was a pile of jiggling milky-white chatchi mochi atop a plate.

"You sure did make a lot. I doubt we'll make it through all of them just by doing a taste test."

"No worries! Just leave half of them!" Rimee Ruu said with a grin as if she was plotting some sort of prank. Still, the older members of the Ruu clan didn't seem to be questioning it, so I didn't pursue the matter any further.

"Well then, thanks for the food."

After it was portioned off onto separate smaller plates, I went ahead and brought a chatchi mochi to my mouth.

Since she had used a minimal amount of the powdered herb, it only provided a light aroma. Still, that alone was enough to make the sweetness stand out even more.

The chatchi mochi really had quite a pleasant texture too, not so much sticky but nice and chewy. And the addition of the occasional solid bit from the peanut-like ramanpa nuts gave it the same sort of accent that Toor Deen's sweet had.

On top of that, the karon milk provided a wonderful flavor. To me, it felt like a unique mix of Japanese and western sweets, made using milk, nuts, and cinnamon.

"Um...I think this is just as tasty as the chatchi mochi Asuta prepared," Toor Deen timidly chimed in.

I offered her a smile. "That's for sure. Even if I provided the basis, this is still a wonderful adaptation. I'm sure being so fond of sweets is why you two were able to improve so quickly, Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen."

"Are you perhaps not that fond of sweets, Asuta?" Reina Ruu questioned.

"Not exactly," I replied with a shake of my head. "I'd say I do enjoy them, but I don't have all that strong of an interest in trying to improve on this kind of taste. And back in my home country, I was always the one tasting sweets rather than making them."

"I see. There really is a distinction between ordinary dishes and sweets, isn't there?"

"Yeah. Back where I come from, cooking and sweet making were generally treated as different jobs too. Of course, there were plenty of chefs out there who excelled at both, but that wasn't the case for me and my old man."

Looking quite impressed, Reina Ruu nodded along. Beside her, Rimee Ruu was getting flustered, saying, "Hey Tsuvai, don't eat all of them. I made them for Papa Donda and Darmu too!"

“The leading clan head and the second son? Hmph, would men really appreciate something this sweet? The Deen clan head even said he hated the sweet poitan that girl made, right?”

As they were chatting, Tsuvai had been popping chatchi mochi into her mouth one after another, so Rimee Ruu eventually shouted, “I said no!” and went to physically restrain the other girl. Though Tsuvai was twelve, she was pretty much the same height as the eight year old Rimee Ruu. “Papa Donda and Darmu can’t drink any fruit wine until they’re healed up! But they can eat lots of sweets, so I want to bring these to them before dinner! They’ve got to eat lots to heal!”

“Ah, I see... It’s important to pair things properly not just with other dishes, but with fruit wine as well,” Yamiru Lea said as she turned toward Toor Deen. “Toor Deen, could that be the reason for the scolding you received? If you were to eat that sweet poitan alongside fruit wine, it could kill off the sweetness and leave behind only a sour taste... It could even make the fruit wine taste worse, so that might be what caused those men to get so angry.” Then Yamiru Lea’s gaze shifted over toward Vina Ruu. “With that in mind, could the fact that you’re a heavy drinker be why you didn’t find the sweet poitan all that delicious?”

“Don’t say stuff like that... I only ever drink at banquets, you know. And wouldn’t that mean Sheera Ruu should like sweets even less than I do?”

“I-It’s not like I’m always drinking fruit wine,” poor Sheera Ruu retorted.

Rimee Ruu turned to the young Deen chef. “Hey Toor Deen, can you make that poitan stuff again?! Then I can bring it to Papa Donda too!”

“Huh? Serving the leading clan head my cooking? B-But if it makes him angry, then I...”

“There’s no way that would happen. Papa Donda and Darmu would both be super happy! They said they really want some fruit wine to go with their salty jerky and that they’d even take sweets!”

Looking worried, Toor Deen glanced my way.

I shot her back a smile and patted her on her slender shoulder.

“Go ahead and make it. Sweet sugar, milk, milk fat, and salt should provide them with plenty of nutrition they can’t get from meat. And you need all sorts of stuff to recover, I’d say. Also, I think the Deen clan head should hear about all this too.”

“All of it?”

“Yeah. That the sweet poitan you made isn’t a dish meant to be eaten alongside meat or wine. But it shouldn’t be any issue eating it as a midday snack or after dinner. It might even be good to just make enough for the people who don’t drink fruit wine with their dinner.”

“B-But that would mean using expensive ingredients to make something the clan head and men who enjoy wine couldn’t eat...”

“A single bottle of fruit wine costs a red coin, doesn’t it? If you keep it to just a snack, I’d say sweets should fall in the same price range. Folks who like wine can drink that, while sweet lovers can enjoy your dish, and everything would be fair, right?”

“That’s right! Before they got hurt, Papa Donda and Darmu would hardly eat any sweets. It was just the women and Ludo eating them!”

Sufira Zaza had silently watched as Toor Deen fidgeted all the while, but now she stepped forward. “Toor Deen, it’s one thing if the Deen clan head simply doesn’t like sweet poitan. But that’s ultimately a matter of taste, not some sign that you prepared a poor dish. If your clan head is having some sort of misunderstanding, then you should do your best to resolve it,” she advised with a serious look on her face, showing none of the ecstasy she’d displayed before.

The Zaza had originally been a clan under the Suun. But now that the Suun had fallen, they had become the new clan over the Deen. That had made the relationship between the two pretty complicated.

“If the men don’t enjoy your sweet poitan, then make it for the women. I would like to learn how to make it here as well and prepare it for my clan head. You are a subordinate of the Zaza, so seeing once again just how skilled you truly are brings me great pride.”

It seemed likely at this point that Toor Deen’s problem would be solved.

As the young chef looked back and forth between me, Rimee Ruu, and Sufira Zaza with teary eyes, she quietly said, “Thank you...”

“Well then, could you explain the proportions of the ingredients as you make it this time? Then the Zaza, Rutim, Lea, and Sudra will be able to make their clan members happy with delicious sweets too,” I said, then looked over at Toor Deen and Rimee Ruu. “Also, I have something I’d like to discuss with the two of you.”



A few hours later, I brought Yun Sudra and Toor Deen back to their respective clans, and then headed home to the Fa house.

I offered to give the Deen clan head a supplemental explanation from my own perspective on the issue, but Toor Deen said it was fine. Anyway, I knew it wasn’t my place to go butting into another clan’s business. Surely, Toor Deen would be able to make her precious family understand. Unless she started crying again, I wouldn’t have any role to play.

There seem to be a surprising number of people with a sweet tooth here at the forest’s edge, so this could lead to a sweet-making boom.

But sugar was a fairly expensive ingredient, and I had already warned them about the dangers of consuming too much. Still, since the people of the forest’s edge already gulped down sugar-filled fruit wine, I didn’t think there was much to worry about on a physical level. At any rate, I truly hoped such sweets would prove a medicine rather than a poison for them.

Still, my own clan head doesn’t seem to have much interest in sweets. So I guess it’s only natural that Toor Deen and Rimee Ruu would surpass me, I thought to myself as I tied Gilulu to a tree and started moving anything that needed to be taken out of the wagon, which I had parked off to the side of the house. That meant the various ingredients for tonight’s dinner and the meals I’d be preparing for the day after tomorrow, as well as the metal trays, steaming baskets and everything else we had used.

After putting those down in front of the entrance, I casually knocked on the door.

“Ai Fa, I’m back. Are you up?”

The female voice that answered back, however, wasn’t Ai Fa’s.

“Ah, hold on a moment! I’ll be done soon, so please, please don’t open the door!”

That voice seemed to belong to Ai Fa’s childhood friend Saris Ran Fou. She had been stopping by these past few days out of concern for my injured clan head, so it was no surprise to find out she was our guest, but her telling me I absolutely shouldn’t open the door made me wonder what was going on.

At any rate, I had no choice but to wait, so I just stood there in front of the entrance. Saris Ran Fou’s “moment” turned out to be around two minutes.

“Sorry for the wait. I’m sure you must have worked hard today.”

“Right, thank...” I started to reply, only for my eyes to shoot open wide. At her feet was a little face staring up at me that was so adorable it stopped my sentence in its tracks.

“Sorry. I was giving this little one milk... This is my child, Aimu Fou.”

“Whoa, you’re already big enough to walk? Nice to meet you... Ah, no, I guess we’ve met before. Hello there, Aimu Fou.”

When I’d first met Saris Ran Fou, she had been cradling this infant in her arms. At the time, I had been more than a little worried about how small and weak the baby looked, but now the child was standing on two legs and half hiding behind their mother’s clothing as they stared up at me.

The kid certainly was little. But those limbs were properly plump, accompanied by a face with some nice color to it. The child had bold blue eyes and soft, light-brown hair that was just starting to grow in. Aimu Fou wore a simple bit of clothing meant for a child, with just a thick sash wrapped around their middle.

What a seriously adorable kid. Saris Ran Fou wasn’t all that tall herself, but her child only came up to a bit over her knees. And that face was so little it was probably only about the size of my palm.

“How adorable. And how old is Aimu Fou now?”

“Still just one. But I’ve been able to raise my child this well thanks to the prosperity brought to us by the Fa clan,” Saris Ran Fou happily replied as she scooped up her beloved child. “Aimu’s still a touch on the small side, but we’re not worried about starvation being an issue any longer. You have my deepest gratitude, Ai Fa and Asuta.”

“No, I’m simply glad that such a cute kid will be able to grow up just fine,” I said, smiling at Aimu Fou since I just couldn’t look away.

The kid just kept on staring at me, but that expression was still plenty adorable. I really wanted to give those little cheeks a poke, but I figured it wouldn’t be good to do so with dirty hands after having just gotten back from working outside.

“Ah, you were in the middle of carrying things in, weren’t you? My apologies. Let me lend you a hand.”

“Oh, no, what you’re carrying there is way more precious than any of my luggage, so no worries. Please, have a seat.”

With that, I cheerfully resumed my work transporting everything. As I did so, I finally greeted my beloved clan head. “I’m back. How are your injuries doing?”

“It’s nothing serious. As long as I don’t move, I can’t feel any pain.”

Ai Fa was seated leaning up against the wall, resting her cheek on her own knee as I nodded her way. There were bandages wrapped tightly around her abdomen, but aside from that, she looked just the same as always. The impression she gave off was that she had more energy than she knew what to do with, thanks to her current lack of exercise. Breathing a sigh of relief at the sight of her, I went ahead and carried my luggage into the pantry.

Meanwhile, Saris Ran Fou knelt down next to Ai Fa and released Aimu Fou. Instantly, the infant toddled on over to my clan head and grabbed at her slender left arm.



“You can’t do that, Aimu. Ai Fa is injured.”

“I don’t mind. Such a small child could never be strong enough to seriously injure me,” Ai Fa stated, her body growing strangely stiff. “I’m more worried about being the one inflicting harm. Is it all right if I move?”

“You don’t have to worry about that. Infants are sturdier than you may think. If your injuries don’t hurt too bad, do you want to hold Aimu?”

“That’s not possible. With my strength, I could accidentally crush your child.”

“My,” Saris Ran Fou exclaimed with an amused chuckle. Ever since she and Ai Fa had reconciled, the expressions she wore had grown remarkably brighter.

Back when Ai Fa had stood in opposition to the Suun clan, all of my clan head’s close relations had cut ties with her so as not to get involved, Saris Ran Fou included. And Ai Fa didn’t want to have a negative influence on her precious childhood friend either, so she also kept her distance. But after those two painful years, they had managed to finally reunite.

“My apologies. All of a house’s women raise a young child together, so instead of accompanying me, Aimu should have stayed behind, but I just wanted to be by your side for as long as possible today, Ai Fa.”

There was a partially woven basket sitting there by Saris Ran Fou’s feet. She must have brought along her work from home in order to be with Ai Fa all this time.

Naturally, rather than finding it a pain, it almost moved me to tears. Ai Fa was healthy aside from a single rib, so loneliness and boredom were her greatest enemies at the moment.

“You have nothing to apologize for. Thank you for thinking of Ai Fa like that. Um, would you mind if I hold Aimu Fou? I’ll go wash my hands now.”

“Of course not. In fact, it would be an honor.”

After carefully washing my hands using the water jug, I timidly reached out and scooped up the little child next to Ai Fa. When I did, I was caught off guard by how light the kid was. If I wanted to, I could have easily held the child with one arm. Like, we were talking six or seven kilograms at most here.

Cradled there in my arms, Aimu Fou just looked up at me blankly. The whites of the child's eyes weren't showing much yet, so the blue irises peeking out at me looked like gemstones. It seemed like a miracle to me how that little nose, that mouth, those limbs, those itty-bitty fingers, and even the tiny fingernails were all in place.

"What a cute kid. I know it's a little late to ask, but is Aimu Fou a boy or a girl?"

"Do you really think a girl would be named Aimu? You still haven't picked up on such things after living here at the forest's edge for so long?" Ai Fa chided in place of Saris Ran Fou.

As I peered curiously down at Aimu Fou, I smiled. "Sorry, but I just can't tell. He's got a pretty face like a girl's, but looks a bit gallant around the eyebrows, so I got confused. I'm sure he'll end up being as much of a pretty boy as Ludo Ruu and Rau Lea."

Ai Fa was watching me. "You look so happy. You've always been quite fond of young children, haven't you, Asuta?"

"Huh? Have we talked about that before, Ai Fa?"

"We have. You said a great many kids would visit your shop back in your home country, and you grew fond of them."

"Ah, back when we first met Tara, right? Well, I don't think that's quite the same thing, since you didn't have many customers bringing kids this small to the restaurant. But infants are all cute in general."

Ai Fa looked somehow displeased and started to frown. She was more the type to have trouble handling small children, so perhaps I had touched a nerve.

Still, it was an objective fact that Aimu Fou was incredibly adorable. If only it were possible, I'd want to feel his weight in my arms forever. Even more so with those unbelievably small hands reaching up and touching my face.

"Ah, don't do that, Aimu Fou. I haven't washed my face, so I don't want you touching anything that could get you sick."

"My, have you been handling poisonous plants in town?" Saris Ran Fou said

with a giggle. “You don’t need to worry so much. Infants are tougher than we often think, you know.”

“But I don’t want to get such an adorable kid dirty with sweat and giba fat.”

Though I was reluctant to do so, I went ahead and handed the infant back to his mother. As Aimu Fou clutched tightly to his mother’s chest, he looked over at me and Ai Fa.

“Aimu is such a cute name. Is it just a coincidence that it sounds like Ai Fa?”

“I gave him that name in the hope that he would grow up into a strong hunter...” Saris Ran Fou answered with an embarrassed smile, and from her seated position Ai Fa gave me a kick in the rear. I had asked the question because I remembered my own clan head giving Gilulu a name similar to that of her father.

But that would mean that even when Aimu Fou was born a year ago, Saris Ran Fou was still holding on to her strong feelings of friendship with Ai Fa. Though the matter with the Suun clan had torn them apart, she most certainly hadn’t forgotten her friend. It might have earned me a kick in the rear, but I was still glad to have confirmed that fact.

“Just how long are you going to keep taking it easy? There isn’t that much time left before dinner, is there?” Ai Fa said.

“Right, right, I’ll get on it. I’ll need to light a stove, but should I use the outdoor one because it could be dangerous?”

“No, we use flames in our own home too, so it’s nothing to worry about,” Saris Ran Fou told me.

With that settled, I went ahead and got to work on dinner. But I didn’t need to hurry or anything, since there were still over two hours left till sunset.

“Oh yeah, I got asked to man the stove for some nobles again,” I reported while chopping aria, causing Ai Fa’s expression to turn even more sour.

“It hasn’t even been a month since that last welcome banquet, has it? Even if they rule this land, aren’t they making requests of you too lightly?”

“Well, it’s Melfried’s wife Eulifia asking for sweets. I’ll have to take time off

work for the day, but I should be done in the castle town not long after the sun hits its peak, so it shouldn't have any impact on the next day's business."

"So you intend to accept?"

"I discussed it with Donda Ruu back at the Ruu settlement, and it seemed like he was leaning that way. Of course, if you or the other leading clan heads object, it won't necessarily happen."

"If the leading clan head Donda Ruu approves, then I will offer no opposition without serious reason to do so..." Ai Fa replied, the look on her face souring more and more.

"Well, Duke Genos seems to be working to limit the burden placed on the people of the forest's edge as much as possible. Plus, the way things are working now has been convenient for letting us keep control of the distribution and pricing of giba meat. I'll be borrowing Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen's help, and we'll make it through this job one way or another."

"Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen?"

"Yeah. Those two seem to specialize in making sweets, so I wanted to try taking this job on with them at my side."

Since Donda Ruu had already given his approval, that just left the response from the Deen clan head.

And furthermore, this time I didn't want it to be me and two cooking assistants, but rather three young chefs taking on a job together. I wanted the nobles to understand that I wasn't the only one worthy of being called a chef here at the forest's edge.

"So what do you plan to do if Gulaf Zaza and Dari Sauti don't have any objections either, Ai Fa?"

"What do you mean? If the three leading clan heads give their approval, I can't exactly overturn their will just based on my personal feelings."

"No, that's not what I meant. Would you want to come along as a guard again?"

"What are you saying?" Ai Fa shot back, her tone instantly lowering a good

bit. “You couldn’t possibly be thinking of leaving me at home and going off to the castle town all on your own, could you?”

“No, of course we’d bring along guards. But since the Ruu clan is entering a break period soon and fewer giba are around, and Donda and Darmu Ruu are taking time off anyway, there doesn’t seem to be any need to push yourself. They said they could provide some men as long as it was just for one day...”

“I’m on break from my hunting work right now. There’s no reason for you to have to entrust this task to anyone else.”

“But you’re injured, right? The swaying of the wagon could cause your injuries to hurt...”

“Asuta,” Sari Ran Fou interjected. “You’re going too far, ignoring Ai Fa’s feelings. If I were in her position, I’m sure I would be sad and angry right now too.”

“Huh? Wh-Why’s that?”

“You were held in the castle town before, weren’t you? Even though it’s now been proven that not everyone living there is an enemy, letting you go there alone would naturally bring the rage and sadness she felt back up.” Saris Ran Fou was staring straight at me as she continued on in a firm tone, “I saw just how much Ai Fa suffered during those days, from closer up than anyone else. Even if there isn’t any actual danger, she would surely suffer just the same if you headed off to the castle town alone. So please, don’t do that to her.”

Saris Ran Fou had been the one to support Ai Fa back when I was captured by Lefreya. And thanks to that, the two of them had reformed the bonds they once shared.

At a loss for words, I turned back toward Ai Fa, only to find my beloved clan head childishly biting her lip.

“Sorry. It looks like I was actually being pretty inconsiderate here. Come with us, please, and I’ll try to make sure the wagon sways as little as possible.”

“I’ll come along not because you asked, but because of my own will,” Ai Fa retorted, looking away in a huff, pouting but not letting Saris Ran Fou see.

As she stared at the nape of my clan head's neck, Saris Ran Fou broke out in a smile. "She may be the fiercest hunter of them all, but Ai Fa also has deeper emotions than any other woman too. As a member of the Fa clan, please try not to forget that, Asuta."

"You make it sound as if I'm an unreasonable child, Saris Ran Fou!" Ai Fa said, glaring at her friend with her face turning red.

However, Sari Ran Fou just met her anger with a smile. "Even so, I adore those mismatched parts of you. And I'm sure everyone who knows you well feels the same."

"C-Cut it out! Since when were you the sort of girl to tease me so?!"

"I'm not teasing. That's how I really feel. And besides, I'm more a woman than a girl now anyway," Saris Ran Fou replied, her beloved child's soft hair rubbing up against her cheek. Aimu Fou didn't seem to understand a thing as he stared blankly at Ai Fa's bright red face.

It was rare to see my clan head show such childishness to anyone but me, but naturally I didn't feel upset by it.

At any rate, that was how it was decided that Ai Fa would accompany me to the tea party in the castle town.

4

The seventh day of the violet month arrived.

As planned, we went ahead and closed the stalls for the day, and headed over to the castle town early. Our group included myself, Rimee Ruu, and Toor Deen, with Ai Fa and Shin Ruu as guards.

There were two reasons Shin Ruu in particular had been chosen. The first was that the guards we had recently been using continuously, Dan and Deem Rutim, had finally returned to hunting duty. Deem Rutim had apparently recovered around when we returned from Dabagg, while Dan Rutim had gotten so worked up after the incident with the lord of the forest that he had demanded that he be allowed back onto active duty, though he had at least agreed not to push himself.

As a result, there wasn't anyone left unengaged under the Ruu clan. Donda and Darmu Ruu were too injured to take this job. Even Ai Fa and Dan Rutim were barely healthy enough to act as guards—though they could still beat down just about anyone from around town if they fought through the pain, even if they weren't able to hunt giba just yet.

Still, the Ruu clan had decided that their members could take a day off from hunting if need be, so it wasn't all that serious of an issue. As for why Shin Ruu in particular was chosen out of their many hunters, it was in order to meet a request from the castle town.

"As this job will be a tea party for noble ladies, if you are to have bodyguards accompany you, we ask that you please choose young ones who are as benign in appearance as possible," a messenger from the castle town had conveyed to us.

Though it was definitely rude, perhaps the request was only natural, considering they had met Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza. If we brought along hunters from the north who wore their giba pelts and skulls, they could easily make those graceful noble ladies faint on the spot.

But at any rate, once all those factors had been taken into account, the young Ruu branch house head Shin Ruu was chosen. Having him take time off to join us wouldn't make as much of a difference on the hunt as borrowing someone like Rau Lea would have. And as for Ludo Ruu, he needed to provide support for the acting clan head Jiza Ruu. And Shin Ruu looked every bit as "benign" as the other two options regardless.

"I can't say I'm particularly happy to have been chosen for a reason like that, but I'm proud to have the chance to lend you my aid, Asuta," Shin Ruu told me as the totos carriage we were riding in passed through the gates to the castle town. Still, his expression did have a touch more melancholy about it than usual. I had heard from Ludo Ruu that he felt bothered about not being chosen to help take down the lord of the forest, which had me worried, but I immediately realized that it was a needless fear.

"Lala Ruu was really loud about how unfair it was. I can't say I understand why she would want to head to the castle town of her own volition," Shin Ruu

said.

“It’s probably because Reina and Rimee Ruu have been the ones to accompany me to the castle town as chefs each time I’ve gone. And Lala Ruu seems to be an unusually curious girl.”

“Hmm... It’s true that being selected to assist you would be a great honor for a chef. Still, I’m only going as a mere guard, and I don’t see any reason to call that unfair.”

“Some things go beyond logical reasoning.”

I wasn’t sure whether or not that answer satisfied Shin Ruu, but he looked pensive. “Hmm...”

Beside him was Rimee Ruu, who looked like she was really enjoying herself with Toor Deen. Toor Deen had a surprising tendency to open up easily to intense women like Yamiru Lea and Lem Dom, but Rimee Ruu was so sociable and earnest that it was no surprise that the other girl would feel comfortable around her too, even offering Rimee Ruu a reserved smile after having been pretty tense earlier in the morning.

The last member of our group was Ai Fa.

Though the roads were flat once we entered the castle town and this totos carriage definitely had better suspension than our wagon, the way here must have had an impact on her. She had remained silent with a sour look on her face as she nonchalantly held her abdomen under her cloak.

The ride seemed to go on forever. Apparently, our destination this time was even farther in than the Turan manor we had been visiting up until now. I didn’t know the precise location and probably wouldn’t have any real grasp of it even if someone told me, but based on the name, The White Bird, it could even be within the grounds of the castle itself.

Supposedly, there would be eight ladies attending. It felt every bit as wild to have people of the forest’s edge prepare a tea party for a gathering of noblewomen as it did to have me man the kitchen for an important welcome banquet. But Eulifia seemed to be truly bold and fearless, and I figured it was a good thing if there were eight noble ladies out there who weren’t afraid of the

people of the forest's edge.

My thoughts stayed on that topic as we swayed along in the totos carriage until the vehicle finally stopped again and the door at the rear opened.

"My apologies for the wait. Please, watch your step," instructed the soldier clad in white armor who had guided us to this point. Perhaps I was just imagining things, but I thought this soldier looked quite young and graceful.

When we went ahead and got down from the carriage, a truly unexpected sight awaited us.

We were in the middle of a front garden paved with white stone. There was a white stone palace in front of us with similarly white stone walls stretching out on either side and behind us. No matter where I turned my eyes, it was all white. Rather than gray bricks, everything around us looked to be made of slick marble.

It's seeming more and more accurate to call it the city of stone.

Bricks were one thing, but it must have taken extraordinary effort to carve out such natural rock. And this wasn't even the castle itself, but just a smaller structure built for noblewomen to hold tea parties. It was hitting me yet again just how well-off Genos was as a town.

The house of Turan only held the title of count. So this is the difference when it comes to dealing with a ducal house instead, huh?

Though it was likely just a one-story building, it was still rather tall and looked quite impressive. A roof stretched out over our heads, supported by stone pillars. It was a gorgeous yet worn building, in a way that reminded me of Greek ruins.

"This way, please. Allow me to first show you to the bathhouse."

Under the soldier's guidance, we passed through a large set of double doors.

The hallway was also made of stone, and unlike the Turan manor, there were no rugs laid out. There were windows up high for illumination, and plenty of light was coming in. Though, there was so much that it made the white stone look almost blinding.

After a short walk, we came to a wall at the end of the hallway. There were two doors there, and two more halls stretched out endlessly off to the left and right.

“Gentlemen should use the right door, and ladies the left.”

“Ah, so there are separate baths for men and women? At the Turan manor we used the same one in turns.”

“Yes. Here at The White Bird, they are separate.”

Naturally, Ai Fa looked displeased, but we had to split up anyway while cleansing ourselves, so there was no great difference there. Shin Ruu and I walked toward the right door while Ai Fa, Rimee Ruu, and Toor Deen moved to the left. We entrusted the ingredients and cooking tools we had prepared to the pages, who would carry them to the kitchen.

On the other side of the door, a young page boy unsurprisingly awaited us. Ai Fa’s group undoubtedly found a maid in their bathroom.

“Allow me to take charge of your clothing.”

“Ah, thanks.”

Since we were all the same gender, there was no need for restraint. I went ahead and stripped down, tossing my clothing into the basket the page held out. Once I was in my birthday suit, the page politely brought his hands together and gracefully bowed to Shin Ruu.

“If you will be accompanying our other guest, then we ask that you bathe as well.”

“I wasn’t really planning to go into the kitchen,” Shin Ruu replied. “I can just keep watch outside the door, so there shouldn’t be any need to cleanse myself, right?”

His eyes still pointed downward, the page shook his head, “No. All guests who visit here at The White Bird are asked to bathe. Unless by ‘outside the door’ you meant outside of the palace.”

“No, I meant outside of the kitchen.”

“In that case, we ask that you please bathe.”

Shin Ruu seemed to hesitate for just a moment, but then he silently started removing his clothing. He didn't seem to have any issue with the act of bathing itself, but rather felt hesitant to part with his blade. Still, it required a certain amount of resolve to come this far in the first place. Even a hunter of the forest's edge couldn't do anything against one or two hundred soldiers, so in a sense, he and Ai Fa were kind of acting as guards in name only. Even so, if the folks from the castle town betrayed our trust, a hunter could at least make it past the stone walls on their own and alert the forest's edge of the urgent situation. Thus, coming as guards to the castle town was still an important task.

At any rate, Shin Ruu and I were now in the nude as the page led us through the next door. There we found the now familiar sight of a steam bath filled with the smell of mugwort.

Using the towel the youth handed me, I went ahead and thoroughly wiped down my steamy body. Though it wasn't as refreshing as bathing in the Lanto river, I had started finding these steam baths pleasant too after having used them a number of times.

Meanwhile, Shin Ruu was glancing all around as he halfheartedly wiped himself down. As I looked at him, I decided to start a conversation. "Huh, you look thin, but you've got just as much muscle on you as Ludo Ruu. Of course, I guess that's only natural when it comes to you hunters."

"You're also rather sturdy for a chef. You look like a man who just turned thirteen and started training as a hunter."

"Yeah, Ai Fa said something similar before. Ah, it's not like I showed her my naked body, though!"

"Nobody claimed you did."

I guess this was what it was like, hanging out with someone in the nude. At any rate, I hadn't had much of a chance to talk to Shin Ruu lately, so I was rather enjoying it.

Once we finished scrubbing off all the dirt and grime, we used the water from a container farther in to thoroughly wash our hair and bodies, completing the task of cleansing ourselves.

“Well then, this way, please,” the page stated once he saw we were done, turning toward a door on the right.

But then, Shin Ruu called out, “Hold on. We entered through the door on the opposite side. Just where exactly are you leading us?”

“To the changing room. Please, come this way,” the page stated, showing no concern as he opened the door.

Shin Ruu passed by me and went through the door first.

Awaiting us there was another stone-built room just like before. However, I didn’t see the basket stuffed with our clothing. Instead, there was a large table in the middle of the room, atop which sat some unfamiliar attire.

“Allow me to assist you in changing.”

“So we can’t continue on without wearing this?”

The boy just gave a deep bow in response to Shin Ruu’s question.

The Ruu hunter reached out toward the table with an intense look on his face. What he picked up was a longsword laid there alongside the clothing. It was around the same length as the blades used at the forest’s edge. When he drew it from its white leather sheath, we could see that it was a well-polished silver blade.

The sword was around eighty centimeters long, with a somewhat thin width of around seven or eight centimeters, and a thickness of only a single centimeter, adding up to a rather heavy straight sword. After looking it over and running a finger along the side of the blade, Shin Ruu suddenly gave a slash through thin air.

If a giba had been there, it surely would have had its skull cracked. His slash was so impressive that it felt as if it would leave a scorching trail through the air.

With a single nod, Shin Ruu returned the blade to its sheath. “It’s a fine blade. I’m sure it must have been expensive.”

“Allow me to assist you in changing...” the page repeated. Though he was even younger than us, his expression and movements were undisturbed,

despite his skin going a shade or so paler. I couldn't help but find that commendable.

Once we were done changing, Shin Ruu made for quite the impressive sight. He was dressed in the same sort of beautiful white attire worn by military officers of Genos. There was none of the armor that the soldiers wore. However, there was a silver sash diagonally over his chest and elegant embroidery along the cuffs and collar, looking akin to a dress suit.

He was also wearing white leather boots, and a second sash around his waist, which the sword was hanging from by his hip. There were fasteners made with an amber-looking stone at the seam of the torso portion, and the whole outfit looked to be made of a high-quality fabric.

If I had to give my opinion, I'd say Shin Ruu also had quite the good-looking face himself. He didn't possess the powerful uniqueness I saw in Ludo Ruu, Rau Lea, or even Darmu Ruu, but he had eyes like you would expect to see on someone of East Asian descent, a high-bridged nose, a slender face, long blackish-brown hair, and an air of intelligence lingering about him in general.

And since he was, of course, a hunter of the forest's edge, there was an intensity and strength about him hidden under that gentle exterior that no one from around town could ever hope to match. With that attire on, he looked as if he was some young noble lord of a storied lineage.

Meanwhile, the cooking uniform I put on wasn't much different from the one I wore at the Turan manor. Sure enough, it was entirely white, with an apron and hat, designed such that only my hands and face were exposed. But it was plenty loose, so it didn't feel tight and stuffy at all.

"You look very natural, Asuta. But I'm sure I look like an utter fool, right?"

"Not at all. In fact, I'd say you look more like a noble than an officer, even."

"That's a bad joke. I'm just glad Lala Ruu isn't with us..."

For the people of the forest's edge, being compared to a noble probably wasn't a compliment. But if Lala Ruu saw him like this, I was certain her reaction would be to stare at him in awe, not laugh or be perplexed.

"Well then, this way, please." The page boy opened yet another door. As I

walked onward, I couldn't help but wonder just how many doors we would pass through before reaching the kitchen, only to find the women already waiting there for us.

Instantly, I was left at a loss for words.

Ai Fa was standing there clad in the same sort of white military attire as Shin Ruu.

"What's with that look? If you have something to say, then out with it already," Ai Fa grumbled, clearly displeased.

And yet, all I could say was, "It's nothing..."

What a truly gallant figure she struck. Her blonde hair and dark skin created a wonderful contrast with the white uniform. Just like Shin Ruu, she had the appearance of an awe-inspiring young warrior.

Back when she rescued me, Ai Fa had dressed up like a princess, and I found this was catching me off guard just as much as that had. The most fitting way to describe her would probably be a beauty dressed in men's attire. The men's clothing did nothing to dull the appeal of her graceful body and long limbs. Instead, it looked amazing on her.

"That is a truly wonderful look on you, Lady Ai Fa."

When I heard that, I turned around to find Sheila standing there with her eyes narrowed blissfully. Apparently, she had been the one to help the women dress.

"Yeah, doesn't she look cool? I wish everyone back at the forest's edge could see," Rimee Ruu chimed in. She and Toor Deen were dressed in matching clothes. Collared tops with skirts that fell midway down their shins and white aprons in front. Honestly, it made them look like tiny little maids.

Though they didn't have hats on, they were wearing something that looked like hairbands. In all likelihood this building wasn't equipped with outfits for such young chefs, so they ended up dressed in something close to the maid attire Sheila wore.

"From here on out, I shall guide you. We ask that you first greet the noble ladies," Sheila stated, opening yet another door. Now dressed as a cook, a

couple maids, and a pair of young warriors, we all followed after her.

We were led all over the place, along hallways more spacious than even the ones in the Turan manor. Eventually, we arrived in front of an especially large and splendid door. On either side of it stood two soldiers dressed the same as Ai Fa and Shin Ruu. Sheila solemnly announced our arrival, and one of the two men silently opened the way for us. The light that poured in lit up the hallway brighter than ever before.

It was an outdoor garden. The ground was coated in green grass rather than stone, but there was a narrow stone path leading toward the center, where I spotted a large circular open-air shelter, under which the noble ladies were already enjoying their tea.

“Lady Eulifia, I have brought our guests from the forest’s edge.”

“My, thank you. You’re...Sheila from the house of Daleim, correct?”

This was my first time seeing Eulifia in roughly a month. Today she had her hair tied up high again and wore a dress as she elegantly sipped from a clay cup. She looked to be around halfway through her twenties and was a graceful young noblewoman with a bright shine in her eyes.

However, there were other people present that I was actually surprised to see. And not just one or two. Even discounting Eulifia, I still recognized half of the eight women gathered there.

“When news of you preparing a tea party spread, Asuta, we ended up with a substantial crowd. It seems you’ve made quite a few friends,” Eulifia said with an amused smile as she pointed toward the other guests with a pale white finger. “This isn’t a stuffy formal gathering, so feel free to catch up as you please. After that, I will introduce you to the rest of the guests.”

After expressing my gratitude to Eulifia, I turned back toward the other women. However, I couldn’t quite decide who I should be calling out to first. As I was dithering, the most energetic member of the group shot me a smile.

“Long time no see, Asuta. Lord Polarth kindly got in contact with me, which is how I ended up attending.” It was none other than Diel, the metalworker’s daughter from Jagar with multiple shades of brown in her hair, talking the way

she always did in polite society. She had a blue dress on over her small frame and wore a silver hair ornament in her bangs. Normally, she had an intentionally boyish air about her, but this is how she usually looked when we met in the castle town.

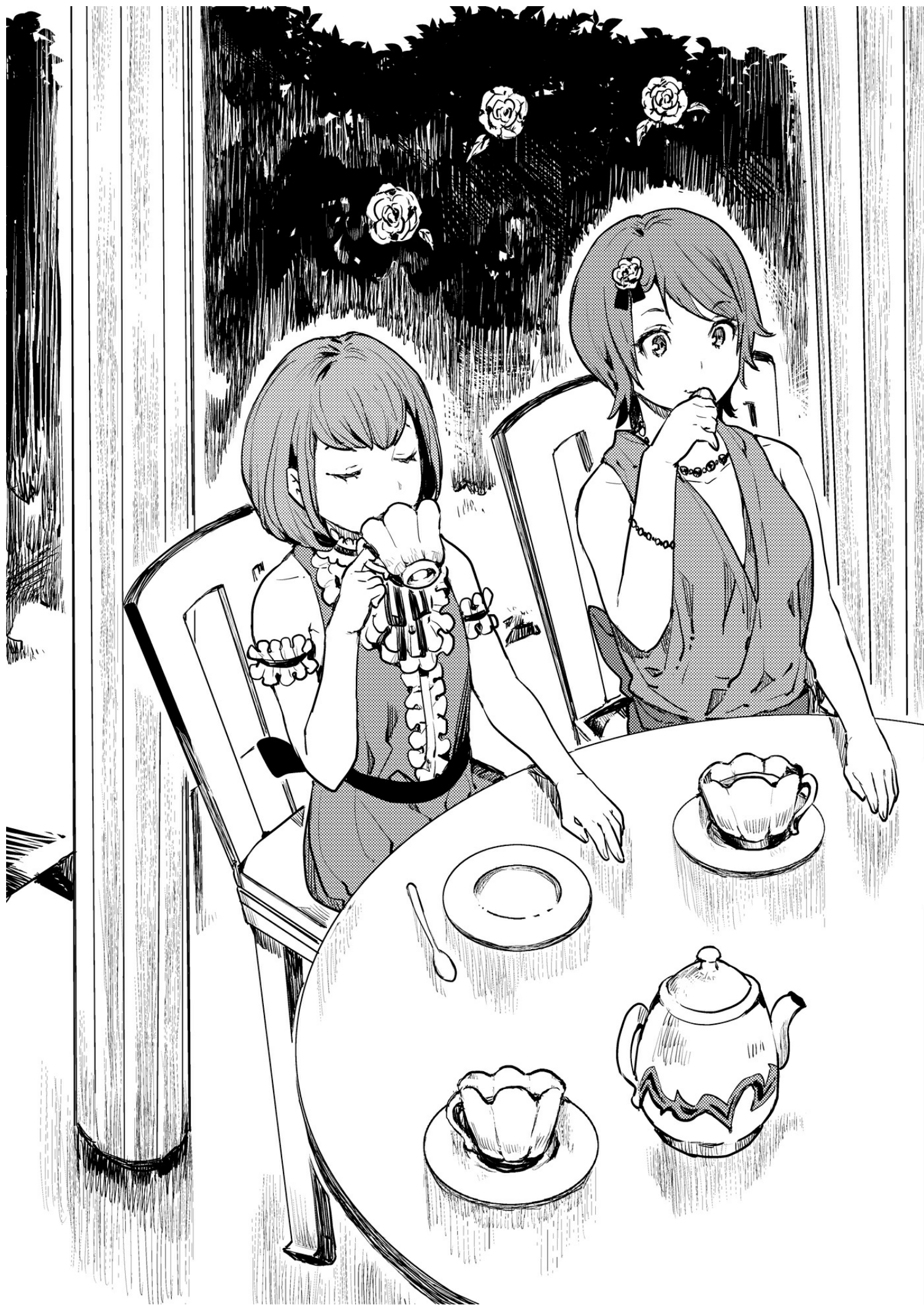
“I spoke, with Polarth, as well. I am, looking forward, to tasting, your sweets,” Arishuna, the star reader with Sym blood who was a guest of the castle, chimed in from the opposite seat. She was wearing a cloak just as always, but it was a fine one not meant for traveling and wasn’t overly adorned, so she didn’t look too out of place surrounded by noblewomen in dresses.

It was a surprise, seeing her and Diel sitting casually at the same table together, considering how the latter had shown clear animosity toward easterners when she happened to have a chance meeting with Shumiral in the past.

Seated beside Arishuna was a woman who was looking at me with obvious antipathy right from the start. Though it took a moment for it to click, this was none other than one of Varkas’s apprentices, Shilly Rou.

Though she had worn her dark-brown hair up tight when cooking, right now it flowed down to her back. Though she was dressed in a much more modest outfit than the other ladies, her milky-white dress still had plenty of frills and adornments, and her hair had decorative strands and beautiful stones braided into it, so I wouldn’t even bat an eye had she been introduced to me as a noble’s daughter or the like.

“Varkas strongly wished to join us here today, but he had work to attend to this morning that he simply couldn’t neglect, so he asked to have her attend in his place.” Eulifia sent a smile toward Shilly Rou. “Since she is the most skilled confectioner of Varkas’s apprentices, I would have loved to have her work the kitchen as well, but that request was firmly refused. I shall simply have to enjoy her skills at another opportunity.”



Shilly Rou gave a bow, but her gaze remained fixed even then. Her devotion to Varkas was so strong that she seemed to see me as an enemy. For now, I made a mental note that Shilly Rou's field of expertise was making sweets.

Then there was one last person I recognized. And out of all of them, she was absolutely the most surprising. She was as adorable as a delicate french doll, wearing a dress covered in frills and ribbons. It was none other than the head of the house of Turan, Lefreya.

Since her father Cyclaeus and uncle Ciluel had been charged as criminals, she had been appointed as the head of her house despite her young age. But as she herself had committed the crime of kidnapping me, she was supposed to be forbidden from participating socially as a noble.

Of course, now that Cyclaeus had been judged, I saw no reason to despise her personally. And I trusted that she felt much the same on her end. Whether or not she knew anything of what was running through my mind, Lefreya wore the same standoffish look as always as she met my gaze.

"There were certainly voices claiming it was too soon to invite her to such an event. But it must be so tough, being shut up in that manor all the time, right? So I extended a special invitation."

When Eulifia said that, Lefreya gave a polite nod in response and then spoke in a prim and proper tone. "Asuta, the manor where I was born and raised is currently being used by the ducal house of Genos. It seems that as planned, it is becoming a place for welcoming honored guests."

"Oh, gotcha... Er, I mean, is that so?"

"Hmph. Though it isn't much, I wished to deliver that news to you personally. After all, who can say how many times we will be able to meet again in the future," Lefreya stated as she shot a dubious look at the space next to me. "By the way, do you have any business with Sanjura, perhaps? If so, I can summon him here."

When I followed her gaze, I ended up gulping. Ai Fa and Shin Ruu, though dressed like handsome young warriors, were glaring like the hunters they were, their eyes blazing bright and furious.

Sanjura's here too?

Sanjura was Lefreya's attendant, and was the one to carry out my kidnapping in the post town some time ago. I couldn't see him anywhere, but Ai Fa and Shin Ruu silently stared at one of the pillars supporting the roof.

The noblewomen whose names I didn't know were making a commotion among themselves, while Eulifia looked upon the two hunters with great interest.

With a light furrowing of her brow, Lefreya called out, "Sanjura," at which a tall figure emerged from behind the stone pillar. It was the man himself, wearing the same attire as Ai Fa and Shin Ruu.

"It has been, some time, Asuta... And the same to all of you, from the forest's edge, as well."

"I never expected to encounter you here..." Ai Fa quietly muttered.

It wasn't as if he was showing any animosity, but he was fully on guard. That was only natural, given the wild, animalistic intensity being shown by the two hunters.

However, the light shining in Shin Ruu's eyes was even brighter than Ai Fa's. Though Ai Fa had seen Sanjura multiple times since his and Lefreya's crimes were judged, this would be the first reunion for Shin Ruu.

"I am here, to guard Lefreya. I have no reason, to act rudely toward you guests, from the forest's edge, so please, be at ease."

"I hear tell you've already been judged by the laws of Genos... It is against the ways of the forest's edge to treat those who have already been punished as if they are still criminals," Shin Ruu replied, his voice even lower than Ai Fa's. "However, I will never forget how you deceived Asuta for as long as I live. That, and the disgrace I felt for failing to protect him."

Sanjura gave a polite bow. I was sure he didn't intend to provoke the young hunter, but I worried that his expressionless response, like the kind you'd expect from a follower of Sym, could go over really badly.

"Is that enough of a reunion? If so, then allow me to introduce the other

ladies present,” Eulifia nonchalantly chimed in with a chuckle. “First is my eldest daughter, Odifia.”

The girl was even smaller than Lefreya. She too looked like a french doll, just of a different size, and she was glancing around at us without reserve.

If she was Eulifia’s daughter, that meant she was Melfried’s child as well. She seemed to have gotten her gray eyes and mask-like expressionless face from her father, but she was still only five or so at most.

“This is Lady Besta of the house of Viscount Talfon, and this is Lady Selanju of Viscount Madel’s house. They were unable to attend the previous welcome banquet, so I reached out to them first for this occasion.”

Though they didn’t seem to be sisters or anything, the two noble ladies had similar facial features and just generally resembled each other in the impression they gave. They appeared to be around my age and were presently looking at Ai Fa and Shin Ruu with concern.

“The head chef for the house of Daleim, Yang, is currently getting ready in the kitchen. The plan for today is to have a tasting competition between him and you three chefs from the forest’s edge.”

“Huh? We’re doing a tasting competition?”

I still didn’t really understand anything about how such things went, but from what I could recall, it was a type of amusement enjoyed by nobles where they awarded points to dishes. Comparing tastes and matching our skills with one another was one thing, but I wasn’t too fond of the idea of assigning points and making it a contest.

“It’s nothing that formal. After all, it isn’t as if we all have tongues as well trained as yours. But please understand that the prize awarded for your services will be determined by the points given.”

“A prize? I heard from the leading clan heads that the payment would be twenty white coins per person...”

“That is the amount for the chef who earns the least points. Third place will be granted thirty white coins, second place forty, and first place fifty.”

So they had brought 140 white coins for a single tea party? That was more than the Fa and Ruu clans put together earned from our stalls in an entire day.

“Normally, we would not award this much, but since we summoned you when you are all so busy, we wished to express our gratitude. Well then, we shall look forward to when the noon bell rings out.”

Unable to say a word about not wanting to deal with a tasting competition, we were led to the kitchen.

In the meantime, I could hear Ai Fa and Shin Ruu whispering to one another, Ai Fa first. “If we trust Duke Genos’s words, then that Lefreya girl no longer possesses the strength to harm any people of the forest’s edge. There shouldn’t be any need to be on guard around that Sanjura man... And yet, I don’t like the thought of having to face him while injured.”

“You have even more perceptive eyes than mine, don’t you, Ai Fa? How would you describe that man’s skill in comparison to the hunters of the forest’s edge?”

“Well...I suppose I would say that he would be a match for Ludo Ruu, at least.”

“Ludo Ruu, huh? Which means that’s who I need to become strong enough to surpass.” I couldn’t help but worry, so I went to cut in between them. But before I could say anything, Shin Ruu added, “It’s nothing serious. I just feel like if I’m not going to have another chance to cross blades with that man, then I’m going to have to hone my skills to be much greater than they are now. Otherwise, I’ll spend my whole life afraid of my own weakness.”

“Oh, I see...”

Shin Ruu had been the closest at hand back when I was kidnapped by Sanjura. Even if The Sledgehammer’s owner, Nail, had been taken hostage, I had still been taken away right in front of the young Ruu hunter’s eyes, so he was left with more self-blame than anyone else.

It made my heart ache, thinking back to when I returned safely, how shaken and overcome with joy this normally composed young hunter had been, with warm tears pouring from his eyes.

“Don’t start digging up old memories for no good reason, Asuta...” Shin Ruu said with a glare, his face going a bit red.

“Whoa, I’m impressed. You’re just as perceptive as Ai Fa.”

“What do you mean? You just wear your thoughts and feelings on your face in a really obvious way, Asuta.”

I felt terribly apologetic as Sheila guided us through the door to the kitchen.

It was smaller than I expected, but it was still around twenty-six square meters, and the sweet scent wafting through the air was readily apparent. From across the room, Yang called out, “Ah, Sir Asuta,” with a bow of his head. “I look forward to working alongside you today. Please, go ahead and use that entire half of the work area.”

“Thank you. Um, I only heard there would be a taste contest for the first time after coming here today...”

“It is much the same for me. Still, knowing Lady Eulifia’s wont, I had my suspicions,” Yang replied, a gentle smile on his slender face.

As his introduction earlier had explained, Yang was the head chef for the house of Daleim. Currently, he was working a stall and cooking for an inn in order to help introduce new ingredients into the post town. Polarth had asked me to work toward the same goal, so his aim was a desire I shared.

He was a very solemn man, but a highly trustworthy one as well. He had to be approaching fifty, but he didn’t look arrogant at all as he worked, and I truly respected him.

“I, of course, personally know how skilled you are, Sir Asuta, as well as those you have instructed, so even if I end up in fourth place, I would not think it a shame. Still, I had heard that chefs who were as skilled as you would be attending, but I certainly never expected them to be so young.”

“I’m a person of the forest’s edge, the youngest daughter of the main Ruu house, Rimee Ruu! Here’s to working together today!”

“Ah, I’m a member of the Deen clan by the name of Toor Deen... I look forward to working alongside you.”

One of the young girls dressed like maids was bursting with energy, while the other timidly introduced herself.

In response, Yang politely bowed his head and said, "I look forward to working alongside you as well."

"As you can see, they're younger than I am, but they might be even more skilled than me when it comes to making sweets. Still, I'll be trying my best so I don't get embarrassed by the outcome."

"It seems preparing sweets is not your field of expertise, correct, Sir Asuta? Meanwhile, while it may be presumptuous to say so, I consider that to be my greatest strength. I suppose this may finally put us on equal footing when it comes to a tasting competition," Yang said, showing me a kindly smile. His expression was shockingly tranquil, free of any haughtiness or competitiveness whatsoever.

5

Just an hour later, our sweets were all ready to eat, loaded up on a cart, and handed off to a page boy. Though the portions for each person were small, there were eight ladies present and waiting, which made for a fair volume of food in the end.

Furthermore, this time around the chefs would have special permission to sample the dishes in the same place as the noblewomen. Apparently, it was part of the amusement to be had from the tasting competition.

We waited in front of a door guarded by soldiers and once the noon bell rang out, we headed into the garden. The same ladies as before were still seated there at the table under the roof.

"Aah, I've grown tired of waiting. Please hurry and bring some satisfaction for our palates."

Eulifia looked to be enjoying herself even more than back during the welcome banquet. She was far more openhearted than I would have expected from a future duke's wife, and though I didn't really have trouble dealing with her, I got the feeling that it would be dangerous to draw too much of her attention, so I

had somewhat complicated feelings about her overall.

“My, how wonderful.”

“They look delicious.”

“I’ve never seen a sweet shaped like this before.”

The noble ladies from the houses of viscounts in particular seemed to be especially excited. Lefreya, meanwhile, wore a composed expression, and the tiny Odifia looked at the plates lined up on the table with suspicion. Of the three guests with no noble blood, one had eyes sparkling with anticipation, another remained perfectly expressionless, and the last was looking competitive, but they all remained quiet.

“In the name of fairness, who made which dish will remain hidden until after the tasting competition is completed,” Eulifia declared. “Since there are four dishes, each of us shall have four points to award. Everyone is free to distribute as many points as they wish to each dish. The results will be determined by the number of points each dish earns in total.”

In that case, I honestly wished everyone could cross the finish line as equals with the same number of points. But even though I had given it my all, looking at things objectively, I felt strongly that Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen’s dishes had turned out better. I didn’t really feel much of a drive to win, and anyway, it seemed like it would be difficult to do so no matter how much effort I put in, so I was actually feeling pretty relaxed at the moment.

“Well then, we will see you all in a little while,” Eulifia said with a smile, at which point our group moved. Though it was said we would sample the dishes in the same place, we naturally wouldn’t be sitting around the same table.

In the shadow of the stone pillars, out of sight from the noblewomen, a table and chairs had been prepared for us. In total, there were seats for five of us: me, Rimee Ruu, Toor Deen, Yang, and his assistant, Nicola.

It had been a bit since I had last seen Nicola. Since she was a servant of the house of Daleim as well, she assisted Yang with his work just like Sheila did. Since Sheila had been assigned to guide us, Nicola seemed to be tasked with helping out with the cooking.

“This girl has quite a knack for cooking, so I am currently training her in a variety of techniques,” Yang had told me some time ago.

Nicola was wearing a sour expression again today as she silently sat down at the table. It was a shame, because if it weren’t for that, her looks would have been good enough to belong to a noble lady.

Now that I think about it, back when I first met her, Rimee Ruu said she looked very sad. I still have no clue why that would be, though, I thought to myself as Yang glanced around the table with great curiosity.

“There’s no need for us to hide which of us made what, is there? Who made this mysterious sweet here?”

“Ah, that one is mine!” Rimee Ruu energetically replied. The fact that she didn’t say “that one’s” was proof that she was at least trying to act more politely. At any rate, what she had prepared was the same karon milk chatchi mochi she had unveiled a few days ago. The one difference was that she had poured some honey on top today. And it wasn’t just any honey, but the maple syrup-like panam honey, which she had boiled with sugar to create a blend similar to brown sugar syrup.

I thought the mitarashi dango-style glaze I had prepared before went well with Rimee Ruu’s chatchi mochi. However, it was also really tasty with panam honey over it. That was what had led me to suggest making this blend, and Rimee Ruu ended up going ahead with it. Though I had made the proposal, the young Ruu chef had been the one to determine the proportions to use. And Mia Lea Ruu had said that since she would be receiving twenty white coins for the job, she could go ahead and use as much honey as she wanted. Even though panam honey was expensive, you could still buy half a liter of the stuff for six red coins. Rimee Ruu had carefully measured it out spoonful by spoonful to get exactly the right amount.

Since she was using honey, she put less sugar in the mochi themselves. Furthermore, she had to use the appropriate amount of honey so as to not drown out the flavors of the karon milk and the cinnamon-like herb. Rimee Ruu spent three days perfecting this recipe in order to make sure the brown sugar syrup brought out the sweetness in the panam honey fully.

“Wow, delicious!” Nicola exclaimed before anyone else. But soon after, her sour expression returned and she said, “My apologies,” with a bow of her head.

“It certainly is good. Despite your young age, you managed to concoct a splendid taste here,” Yang commented in admiration, to which Rimee Ruu gave a bashful giggle. “Still, this other sweet is every bit its match. You must have made it, yes, Asuta?”

“No, Toor Deen made that one.”

The young Deen chef had presented her hotcake-style baked poitan. And she had also come up with a way to improve it: the addition of fresh cream made from karon milk on top.

When I made fuwano hotcakes in the past, I had adorned them with panam honey and fruit jam, but that didn’t seem necessary for Toor Deen’s sweet, which already had an exquisite harmony to it. Even without using those toppings, the sugar, milk fat, and egg blended into her batter already gave it a rich sweetness. It was a delicate flavor that seemed to reflect Toor Deen’s nature, so adding honey or jam would just be too overpowering.

“This is the sweet that I prepared.”

I had made donuts filled with arow jam.

Though I had been thinking of trying to improve the taste of the steamed pudding, I had tasted Rimee Ruu’s version of the dish prepared with karon milk and it was every bit as good as her chatchi mochi, so I figured I couldn’t possibly win that way and felt the need to retreat from that front.

I had already taken on the challenge of making donuts to meet Lefreya’s demands once before. Back then I hadn’t hit upon a way to fill them inside and had just added panam honey and jam on top, so I went ahead and tried to figure that out this time around.

One thing I tried at the same time was wrapping the dough around custard cream, but there was too much heat from the frying oil, which returned the cream to a liquid state, so I didn’t get the result I was seeking.

Instead, I boiled arow jam with sugar and honey. I took this mixture and set it in a round shape on some dough, then wrapped the dough around it. Once the

doughnuts were done frying, I coated them in melted sugar.

The women who liked sweets at the forest's edge had all enjoyed the end result. However, a number of them said that it left their throats feeling overly dry. But I decided that would be fine, since the women here today had tea to drink thanks to the nature of the event, but who could say how that would turn out.

"They're all delicious. I am once again reminded how truly skilled all of you from the forest's edge truly are," Yang stated.

What he had prepared was something similar to a pie, using numerous thin layers of fuwano on top of one another.

Atop that crispy baked pie crust sat what was likely a sauce made from the peach-like minmi fruit. And just like Rimee Ruu's chatchi mochi, it seemed to use that cinnamon-y herb. It looked just plain tasty, with both a good appearance and aroma to it.

"Ah, um, do I have to eat this one too?" Rimee Ruu whispered to me, her eyebrows drooping. Perhaps the shape of it was reminding her of the sweet that Timalo had prepared before in the castle town. It had plenty of liquor mixed into the dough, and when Rimee Ruu tasted it, she had said that it was awful, with tears in her eyes.

"Yeah. I can't say how it turned out, but at least give it a bite. If you don't like it, it's not considered an issue to leave a plate uncleared in town," I whispered back so that Yang wouldn't hear.

Rimee Ruu nodded back with a grim look, "Okay... But if I can't eat it, then can I give it to Ai Fa or something?"

"Okay. I'll try to come up with an excuse if that happens."

Though it was incredibly rude to be coming up with such a plan before even trying the pie, complex flavors were popular in the castle town, so it was no surprise that an eight-year-old like Rimee Ruu would be hesitant.

With our agreement now in place, Rimee Ruu broke off a small bit of Yang's sweet and resolutely shoved it into her mouth. With her eyes shut tight and her brow furrowed, she chewed away at the crust. With each bite, the tension in

her forehead loosened up, and by the time she swallowed, she was wearing a brilliant smile.

“So tasty! This is really, really good!”

“Thank you,” Yang replied with a smile of his own.

When I gave it a try myself, I found it was plenty delicious. The fuwano crust had been baked until it was nice and crispy, but it also hid a moist texture on the inside. Though I could sense the sweetness of sugar or honey from it, it seemed like the source of that moisture might have actually been oil. Had he soaked it in reten oil or something?

The more I bit into it, the more interesting I found the texture. There was the crispy surface and moist interior, a somewhat sticky bit, and also a mild fiber-like texture hidden inside that rubbed up against my teeth.

Those four different textures were quite interesting to experience, and the minmi sauce and sugar provided the perfect amount of sweetness. The herb flavors that tended to be overly strong had been kept at an appropriate level, and he seemed to have paid as much attention to the fine details as Toor Deen had for her dish.

By the time I swallowed my first bite, I had started to come around to the opinion that it was incredibly good. It didn't have an especially flashy taste, but I was moved in a whole different way than I had been when I tried the sweets prepared by Timalo and Varkas.

Fittingly for a snack, it felt incredibly light and went down smoothly. And with all those different textures, your mouth never got bored of it. The sweet had a subtle yet definite presence, such that I felt I'd have to take care not to just keep on eating it without thinking.

“This is delicious. Sorry if this sounds a bit rude, but I think this is better than any of your dishes I've had before.”

“Thank you,” Yang said, smiling yet again.

“It has a really unusual texture to it. I'm assuming this smoothness is from reten oil, but I can also sense a bit of a stickiness beside that.”

“That must be from the gigo.”

“Gigo?! So you can use that in sweets too?”

Gigo was a type of vegetable akin to a yam. I never would have thought to use it when making sweets. Perhaps because it had been heated through so thoroughly, I couldn't sense its characteristic earthy flavor. And I figured he must have carefully considered how much to use.

“It isn't rare at all in Genos for a chef to use gigo when making sweets. It should hardly be a surprise, compared to the way that you use boiled-down chatchi starch, Sir Asuta.”

“Is that so? And I also noticed some sort of fine yet fairly chewy fibers, so was that some other kind of vegetable?”

“I did not use any vegetables beside gigo. That must be from the kimyuus meat.”

“Kimyuus meat? You used *meat* in a sweet?”

“Yes. *That* is not so common in Genos. I cut it up thinly and steeped it in panam honey, to end up with kimyuus breast meat with the meaty taste entirely removed.”

Now that he mentioned it, that could very well have been the texture of meat. Still, it was one thing when we were talking about a meat pie, but using meat in such a sweet dish certainly never would have occurred to me.

“It's really good. I'd love to eat lots more of it,” Rimee Ruu chimed in while reluctantly staring at her empty plate. Toor Deen also looked quite impressed.

As that was going on, Sheila walked back over from the noble ladies she had been serving.

“The results of the tasting competition have been decided. Please, join the others over there.”

And so, we ended up once again forming a line in front of the noblewomen.

While waiting for the results to be announced, I thought I could at least figure out where I would be ranked. My only real concern was whether or not Ai Fa would give me a lecture when we got back.

“Well then, please read aloud the number of points. Naturally, starting with the one that earned the most.”

“Very well... First place earned eleven points. Four of those came from Lady Odifia, and the others awarded one point each.”

So that difficult-looking little lady had gone and given all her points to a single sweet? Currently, Odifia was glaring at Sheila to hurry up and announce who made it.

“The dish selected was Lady Toor Deen’s dish using poitan.”

For a moment the space fell silent, and then Toor Deen let out an uneasy, “Huh?”

Eulifia gave an elegant smile, staring at the young chef.

“My! So you are Toor Deen? There were three unusual sweets presented, so it seemed impossible to tell which of you from the forest’s edge made what... However, your dish was the only one to receive points from everyone. Congratulations.”

Toor Deen clung to me, looking as if she was about to cry. I patted her on the shoulder with a smile and a “Congratulations” of my own.

“Second place earned eight points. Three came from Lady Selanju, two from Lady Besta, and one each from Ladies Eulifia, Diel, and Shilly Rou,” Sheila politely stated as she continued announcing the results. “The dish selected was Sir Yang’s minmi dish.”

With a gasp, Yang bowed his head.

In response, Shilly Rou shot him a piercing glare.

“So that was your work, was it? You are the head chef of the house of Daleim, correct?”

“Yes, that is right.”

“Though it was a very commonplace fuwano sweet, the way you baked and flavored it was flawless. And though it was very ordinary, it was a truly wonderful idea to use kimyuus meat in it.”

“I am honored by your excessive praise.”

“It wasn’t excessive. I’m certain my own master would have said much the same.”

In addition, the two noble ladies who looked as if they could be sisters were both praising Yang’s dish. Meanwhile, Diel had a troubled look on her face and seemed displeased as she scratched the tip of her nose. She must have expected I would come in either first or second.

However, I wasn’t disappointed in the least, personally. Yang’s sweet was simply wonderful, and without any reservations, I felt completely happy for Toor Deen that her dish had received even higher praise.

“Third place received seven points. Two each from Ladies Eulifia, Diel, and Shilly Rou, and one from Lady Besta.”

This time, Diel leaned forward a bit.

However, reality doesn’t always match up with our expectations.

“The sweet chosen was the chatchi dish prepared by Lady Rimee Ruu.”

“Huh?” The young Ruu chef tilted her head.

I went ahead and patted her reddish-brown hair. “Congratulations. That’s only one point behind Yang.”

“Eh? You came in last, Asuta? I feel sort of bad, somehow.”

“It’s nothing to be sad about. I could tell just how delicious the sweets you all prepared were, so I’m satisfied with the results.”

The ones who *didn’t* seem satisfied were the guests attending the tea party. Diel’s eyebrows drooped with displeasure, and there was a fire burning bright in Shilly Rou’s eyes.

And with that, my name was read.

“Fourth place earned six points. Three each from Ladies Lefreya and Arishuna. The sweet selected was Sir Asuta’s arow dish.”

That meant Lefreya and Arishuna had given one point each to Toor Deen’s dish and the rest to mine. Secretly, I found that a somewhat amusing result.

“There is no need for you to be discouraged, Asuta. These results came after much discussion, and the impression from all eight of us was that none of these sweets were inferior. However, dishes fried in oil have fallen out of fashion in Genos, which surely lost you a number of points,” Eulifia stated with a calm smile.

“Much obliged,” I said with a bow.

“And furthermore, you are the one who taught these adorable little chefs, correct? You should take pride in that fact. I wonder just how many chefs here in Genos could make such delicious sweets.”

“Mother,” a lisping young voice interjected. Naturally, that had come from Eulifia’s daughter Odifia. “That sweet was really good. I want to hire this girl.”



“My, we can’t do that, Odifia. The duke forbade hiring chefs from the forest’s edge...at least for now.”

“So we can’t?”

“That’s right.”

The expressionless little noble looked very displeased as she turned toward Toor Deen. “Then you should make sweets for me again sometime, okay? Promise?”

“Huh? I-I cannot enter the castle town without permission from the leading clan heads.”

“Do not worry yourself,” Eulifia said. “If we act too selfishly, it will cause trouble for my precious husband, after all. However, hopefully we may summon you again in a way that will not lead to an issue.”

If that was just once a month or so, the leading clan heads would probably permit it. And since Toor Deen looked like she was on the verge of tears again, caught between feeling anxious and joyful, I once again patted her on the shoulder as Eulifia continued.

“Still, all of those sweets were simply wonderful. Though I personally gave many points to that Yang gentleman’s dish, they were all so delicious that I felt like I was in a dream.”

“That is certainly true. We will have to ask our own head chefs to strive even harder,” the noblewomen from the viscounts’ houses earnestly chimed in.

And then, unable to hold it back any longer, Shilly Rou finally spoke up.

“Asuta, Varkas went so far as to call you a worthy rival, did he not? So does a result such as this not leave you feeling embarrassed?”

“Not at all. The sweets prepared by the other three chefs all turned out wonderfully.”

“Your handling of the heat was still half-hearted, and you did not manage the arow perfectly. You did a fair enough job with a fried dish back at the welcome banquet, so how do you explain this performance?”

“Frying meat is more my specialty than sweets. I won’t deny my own inexperience.”

Shilly Rou bit her lip while looking somehow frustrated, then turned away in a huff.

“It seems I was correct to refuse the request to work the kitchen today. Even if I defeated you, it would be nothing to brag about.”

“My, despite your lovely appearance, it seems you are quite passionate. I suppose you would need such strong emotions in order to cut ties with the Rou house and become a chef’s disciple, though...” Eulifia said with an amused smile.

Now that she mentioned it, Diel and Arishuna were one thing as they were guests of the castle, but Shilly Rou’s position was ultimately that of a chef’s apprentice. If she was able to attend a tea party for noblewomen even so, then had she come from some sort of distinguished lineage?

“At any rate, this has proven to be a most enjoyable time. You will all be awarded the promised payment upon your departure from The White Bird.”

It seemed that was the signal to leave. Sheila gave a bow and then led us along the stone path, taking us back inside. On our way to the changing room, Ai Fa came in close to me and said, “Hey. You’re thinking you don’t care about winning or losing, aren’t you, Asuta?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much how I see it.”

“But how would you feel if I were to lose to everyone else in a contest of strength between hunters?”

I glanced over to see the expression on her face. As expected, she was wearing an even deeper frown than ever before. “Hmm, I can’t really picture it, but it’d probably be frustrating.”

“I see. So can you understand how I feel now?”

“Yeah...but on the other hand, I’d like you to understand properly too. If we were to compare the chefs from today to hunters, then they all would have been skilled enough to be selected for the final eight.”

Turned away from everyone else, Ai Fa wore an unchanged expression as she rustled her hair. Even though it was Dan Rutim that she had lost to, she had still looked very frustrated, and so she must not have liked how nonchalant I was acting.

Of course, if it had been anything other than sweet making, I probably wouldn't have been able to remain so calm either. Back when I went up against Varkas with a six-course meal, I had been incredibly worked up. But now, the desire to congratulate Toor Deen, Rimee Ruu, and Yang on their results took priority.

I just didn't see sweet-making as something that fell inside my sphere of expertise. Though Shilly Rou had pointed out that my dish was half-hearted, I had no plans to try to improve it further. I would rather spend that time training my giba-cooking skills instead.

And so, I got excited for a different reason entirely. I felt once more the desire to bring others joy with my giba cooking, just like Toor Deen, Rimee Ruu, and Yang had done with their dishes today.

First up would be re-examining our menu on offer in the post town for the fast-approaching sun god's revival festival. Right from the very start, my job had been solely to show the delicious taste of giba to as many people as possible and bring more prosperity to the forest's edge through the sale of giba meat.

And on top of that, I wanted to get my feelings across to my deeply sulking clan head.

"Sorry, Ai Fa. I just can't find much passion when it comes to making sweets."

"Why is that?"

"I mean, you don't seem to have any interest in them at all."

After staying silent for a moment, Ai Fa gave me a moderate-strength kick in the leg.

And so yet another job in the castle town came to a close.

Chapter 2: Invitation to the Forest's Edge

1

"Whoa, we're really in the middle of the forest!" Tara cheered excitedly.

We were on the path from the post town to the settlement at the forest's edge. Similarly staring out from the back of the wagon, Dora added, "It sure is something," clearly impressed.

It was currently the tenth of the violet month. We had finished our work in the post town, and it was a little past the lower second hour.

This was the day that Tara and Dora finally set foot in the settlement at the forest's edge.



It all started two days prior on the day after the tea party in the castle town, when we stopped by to purchase vegetables from Dora in the morning just like always.

When I mentioned we would be inviting Mikel and Myme, who lived in the Turan lands, to the forest's edge in two days, Dora started pondering, "Hmm..." while holding the aria I had ordered. "The sun god's revival festival is coming up soon, so we're terribly busy taking care of our harvesting before the day comes. We're hiring more people than usual in order to pick all the vegetables in time. See, from the middle of the violet month until the start of the silver month, you can sell as much produce as you put on sale."

"Yeah, it definitely sounds like a huge event. We're also preparing to expand our business in advance."

"Of course. So, things will be real hectic until the violet month is over... Naturally, Tara and I don't really have time to be fooling around."

"It sounds like you all have it rough."

“That’s why right around now is just about the only time when we’ll have any leeway to move around,” Dora stated, a resolute look on his face as he handed over the bag of aria. “Hey Asuta, do you still want to invite Tara to the settlement at the forest’s edge even now?”

“Yeah, of course.”

As I expectantly leaned forward, Dora nodded back. “I see. In that case, I’ll do everything I can to convince my wife and the old ladies back home so that we can slip away from work for half a day to head there.”

“Really?!” I loudly asked back.

“Yeah,” Dora replied with a smile. “You all came out to the Daleim lands, after all. So everyone already got to know what sort of folks you are and shouldn’t have any strong objections. And I want to go see your place every bit as much as Tara does!”

“Thank you! I’d love it if it could really happen!”

“I’ll make sure it does! However, there’s just one thing I want to ask of you...”

“What is it? I’ll do anything I can to help!”

“It’s nothing all that serious. I’d just like to invite another enthusiastic girl along with me and Tara.”

It turned out he was talking about Yumi.

Despite the age difference, apparently she and Tara had really hit it off when the young girl had talked passionately about the settlement at the forest’s edge.

Dora continued, “Her dad is supposedly pretty hard-headed, but since he’s started selling giba cooking he’s probably changed his thinking about the people of the forest’s edge at least a bit, so I’m sure Yumi will be able to convince him.”

His predication certainly hit the mark, as on our way back for the day we got the good news from Yumi.

Now that it had come to this point, I figured it wouldn’t be fair to keep this a secret from the rest of my business contacts, so I let the other inn owners know.

Naudis of The Great Southern Tree replied with a smile, “Sounds like an enjoyable get-together.” However, he didn’t seem to consider coming along himself at all.

Nail from The Sledgehammer happily narrowed his eyes and said, “I believe that will be a very meaningful venture.” He had been praying that the prejudice against the people of the forest’s edge would fade away. However, he didn’t seem to arrive at the idea of closing up shop to participate either. And since I didn’t want the number of guests to increase out of control, I didn’t try to invite them myself.

However, out of the ones I told, Milano Mas of The Kimyuus’s Tail said, “Hold on... If you’re going to be inviting five people from town to the settlement at the forest’s edge, then would you mind adding one more?”

“Huh? You want to come along too, Milano Mas?”

I was seriously caught off guard, but I’d naturally be happy to have him. However, he shook his head and answered, “No. There wouldn’t be any point to a guy like me coming along. And it’s not like I’ve got that much free time on my hands either.”

“Then who were you thinking?”

“My daughter, Telia.”

For a moment, I was left at a loss for words. “T-Telia Mas? But she’s still afraid of hunters from the forest’s edge, isn’t she?”

“That’s exactly why. Hunters rarely ever visit the post town, so she’ll never run across them if she doesn’t head there herself, right?”

I, of course, had no way of knowing, but would it really be right to go ahead with such a drastic method of treatment? Milano Mas’s only daughter, Telia Mas, was a very polite and kind girl, but she also seemed very frail and had trouble handling things when they got rough.

Personally, I had already sensed great progress on her end just from how she had opened up to me, Reina Ruu, and Sheera Ruu despite how afraid she had been of the people of the forest’s edge. I had figured that given time, she would eventually become fully desensitized on her own.

However, there was a more serious look than I'd ever seen in Milano Mas's eyes.

"She's afraid of you people of the forest's edge because I raised her that way. It's not like I've got that long left in me, but she still has her whole life ahead of her... So as long as I'm still breathing, I want to try to deal with my screw-up."

"You don't have to put it like that..."

Milano Mas's best friend and his wife's older brother—Telia Mas's uncle—had died as a result of the Suun clan's villainous deeds. Then the innkeeper's wife grew sick from heartache and followed after them. Due to Cyclaeus pulling the strings, the Suun hadn't been judged for those crimes. With all that in mind, it was no surprise that Milano Mas ended up taking issue with the people of the forest's edge. He couldn't really be faulted for that. However, his expression remained deadly serious.

After being summoned by her father, Telia Mas said with a deathly pale face, "Please allow me to accompany you."

Now that it had come to this point, I couldn't exactly turn her down. I had to trust that seeing how we lived with her own eyes wouldn't end up having a negative effect.

Adding her to the list, we were now dealing with a group of six.

I had already gotten permission from the leading clan head Donda Ruu. When Dari Sauti and even Gulaf Zaza were informed of the number we'd be bringing, all they had to say was, "There's no big difference between two people and six."

It had already been proven that Mikel and Myme had a positive influence on the chefs of the forest's edge. Still, Telia Mas with her difficult feelings was one thing, but Tara, Dora, and Yumi were pretty much going on a tourist visit.

Even so, the leading clan heads of the forest's edge had all given their approval. Perhaps my explanation that we and the townsfolk needed to keep working to understand one another had gotten through to them, or maybe it was just down to their lack of interest in having anything to do with outsiders. I had no way of knowing, but at any rate, the leading clan heads didn't turn down the request.

I went ahead with the plan, hoping we could satisfy Tara and Yumi's earnest excitement while also strengthening the bonds between town and the forest's edge.



On the tenth of the violet month, our wagons were heading toward the Ruu settlement.

We had come to the post town with two wagons, but since we had eight workers and our luggage on the way back, we couldn't have all of our guests ride together.

The wagon that had been bought to help the clans under the Ruu do their shopping had been pulled into town by the reddish-plumed totos Jidura. The one holding the reins was the Ruu clan's guest Barthia.

"Sorry for the wait. Go ahead and hop on in."

Myme had gotten along well with Barthia during the trip to Dabagg, so she and Mikel rode in that wagon. Tara and Telia Mas, meanwhile, seemed more comfortable in my wagon, so I took in the four remaining guests. Of our workers, only Yamiru Lea stayed with me, since she wasn't timid in the least, while Toor Deen and Yun Sudra rode in Barthia's wagon.

Inside the wagon, Telia Mas unsurprisingly seemed quite tense. Her dark-brown hair was pulled together behind her head, and not only was this girl—who was around my age—anxious around strangers to begin with, but I was also the only person she knew in the wagon. The only other people of the forest's edge she could talk openly with were Reina and Sheera Ruu, as we all gave her cooking lessons back at The Kimyuus's Tail. And she hadn't had any interaction with Tara and Dora whatsoever before now.

Ultimately, the one to help the timid Telia Mas loosen up turned out to be Yumi.

"Hey, do you remember me? We've met several times at inn gatherings before."

"Y-Yes. You're the daughter of The Westerly Wind's owners, aren't you? That's what my father said."

“What, so you don’t remember me after all? My name’s Yumi. And your name was Telia Mas, wasn’t it?”

“Th-That’s right. I’m honored that you remembered it.”

“You don’t need to be so afraid, you know. I’m not nearly as mean as I look!”

Really, she didn’t look mean at all, but Yumi was still considered a bad girl around the post town. She was dressed in a showy top and fluttery skirt, as well as a number of jangling accessories. That was certainly quite the contrast compared to Telia Mas, who wore a simple top and long skirt with little exposed skin. Though they were both daughters of inn owners, their personalities and appearances were so different that it was kinda amazing.

“I’m really looking forward to seeing the settlement at the forest’s edge! I’m sure Asuta will make us some incredibly delicious stuff!”

“That’s true... My cooking skills are still quite inadequate, so hopefully I can pick up at least a little.”

“Hmm? You came to learn how to cook? I don’t have any interest in that, myself.”

“N-No, I just came to observe, of course. But since I’m taking time off work, I have to at least gain something from the experience...”

“So serious! I only ever think about how to skip out on work.”

This pair who both had ties with me were now in the process of forming a new bond of their own. I really loved stuff like that.

Before I noticed it, Tara and Dora had also joined in the conversation, and it got quite lively in the wagon. Meanwhile, Yamiru Lea had remained beside the driver’s seat the whole time and stared at the scenery passing by. She might not have been timid, but she also didn’t have any interest in interacting with outsiders.

“Sorry for the wait. We’ll arrive at the Ruu settlement momentarily.”

Having overcome the heavily sloping path in just a little over ten minutes, I stopped the wagon a little bit before reaching the Ruu settlement. Normally I would slow down and take the wagon all the way to the main house’s kitchen,

but for today I was giving a tour of the forest's edge, so I wanted to walk the rest of the way on foot.

I got down from the driver's seat first, then handed Gilulu's reins to Yamiru Lea and circled around to the rear of the wagon.

"Come on, Tara."

Tara's cheeks were flushed with excitement and anticipation, and when I held my hand out she accepted it and got down. Dora came next, followed by Yumi and Telia Mas holding hands, at which point we started walking down the trodden yellow path through the forest's edge.

The second wagon then parked, and its riders soon appeared too. It seemed the women of the forest's edge over there were also going to accompany the guests on a walk.

"Wow... The trees really grow up that high?" Tara said while tugging on her father's arm and bending so far backward that it looked like she would fall over.

As Dora replied, "Y-Yeah," his gaze was darting about restlessly.

When Yumi noticed what he was doing, she flashed him the whites of her teeth. "What's the matter, old timer? Scared of the forest?"

"I-I mean, I've been warned since I was a kid not to go near the forest of Morga. Even if I know there's no need to be afraid, my body just won't listen to me."

"Hmm, I guess that's how things are when you live in the Daleim lands. I was only ever told to avoid the people of the forest's edge," Yumi said, and then she turned and shot me a bright smile. "But, well, thanks to the fact that I ignored that advice, I ended up getting close to all of you. So I figure it's okay to ignore that stuff every now and again."

It was around then that Vina Ruu approached with Myme and Mikel from behind us. "Sorry for the wait... Since we'll be entering the Ruu settlement, allow me to guide you as the eldest daughter of the main Ruu house..."

"Hmm? Do you actually hold some kind of position here at the forest's edge?" Yumi asked.

“It’s nothing of note... I just happened to be born sooner than my other siblings...”

Surprisingly, Yumi seemed to have taken a shine to Vina Ruu. Perhaps she sympathized with how the eldest Ruu daughter needed to keep on brushing off ruffians with a sweet smile.

Meanwhile, the familiar face of Reina Ruu approached an even more nervous-looking Telia Mas.

“Now then, let’s get going. The Ruu clan welcomes you.”

And so we formed a line and headed toward the Ruu settlement.

Before long, the forest opened up on the left, and the settlement spread out before our eyes. It consisted of eight houses all situated around a wide plaza. The plaza was large enough to hold the hundred people under the clan, and the wooden houses were plain and unadorned. One of them was the house that Mida had worked so hard to build. Various members of the Ruu clan could be seen all over the place, working hard just the same as always.

Some were chopping firewood off to the side of their house.

Others were tanning hides atop cloths that were stretched out wide.

Children ran around playing tag near several baskets full of drying pico leaves.

Giba fat was probably being boiled on a stove somewhere in order to make candles and lard. I could smell the strong scent of fat wafting through the air, which some people had issues with.

And then there was the aroma of herbs, just as strong as the fat, which lingered around the house closest to us.

That was the house Ai Fa and I had stayed at in the past, where Jeeda and Bartha were currently living. I had heard that one of the rooms was remodeled into a smoking room, so they must have been making jerky. Or perhaps they were boiling bones in order to practice making giba bone soup.

At any rate, the sight of the Ruu settlement had long since become a part of my everyday life.

It was a peaceful sight of people working away in that circular space cleared

out from the surrounding deep forest. Everything felt tranquil, between the clearly delineated blue sky, dark green forest, and yellow ground. It made for such an idyllic sight that it was hard to imagine that dangers such as giba, mundt, and poisonous insects lurked out in the neighboring forest.

What did our four guests who were visiting for the first time think of it all? I didn't feel like rushing to ask them as we slowly strolled around the plaza, only for a small figure to come rushing out from behind the house in front of us with incredible speed.

"Hey there! Welcome to the Ruu settlement!" It was Rimee Ruu, bounding over like a little bunny right toward Tara. The young girl from town had been in a bit of a trance, but now she once again wore a bright smile.

"You really came! It's like I'm dreaming!"

Rimee Ruu was hugging Tara tightly with all her strength. Though she was a child, she was still a person of the forest's edge, so Tara looked rather uncomfortable, but she didn't complain at all, instead giving a full force hug of her own back.

"I'll show you around from here! And if you've got any steel, I'll take it for you!"

"Nobody has any blades. I checked in advance, so no worries," I said.

"Got it. Well then, first up is the kitchen!"

Dora and the others had said they wanted to see our everyday lives, and so the plan was to prepare for business again today and then have a study session like always.

After that, we would move to the Fa house for dinner. Then, once we finished eating, everyone would be escorted back by wagon. Rimee and Ludo Ruu would also participate in the dinner, and we had arranged for them to see everyone off.

"Ah, before that, would it be possible to greet the head of the Ruu clan?" Dora chimed in.

Rimee Ruu had started walking along in high spirits while holding Tara's hand,

but now she turned to look his way. “Do you mean Papa Donda? He’s resting in the house because of his injuries.”

“Then would us going to see him be a hassle? And would it be rude to ask for an audience with one of the leading clan heads to begin with?”

“Hmm? He’s been saying he’s so bored it could kill him, so it shouldn’t be any kind of hassle. But he can be really scary for anyone outside of our family.”

“Ah, I’ve met him a number of times before, so that shouldn’t be an issue. But I don’t know about everyone else.”

Yumi looked straight at Dora, faltering a bit.

“The leading clan heads of the forest’s edge are those men who took the criminals into the castle town, right? So one of them is your old man?”

“If you’re scared, you can just wait outside.”

“I’m not scared!” Yumi shouted, though she then whispered into my ear, “But he wouldn’t be one of those guys who wear giba skulls and pelts over their heads, right? I just can’t imagine someone like that having such adorable daughters.”

“Ah, those are the hunters of the Zaza and Dom clans. Still, I’d say Donda Ruu looks just as fearsome as any of them.”

“Got it... Then I’ll go ahead and steel my resolve,” Yumi replied, closing her eyes and doing some deep breathing.

Meanwhile, I turned to Telia Mas. Though her face was pale, when she saw me looking she quietly said, “I’ll go.”

“Now that you mention it, we’ve never greeted the Ruu clan head before, have we? Let’s go too, dad,” Myme earnestly chimed in.

Mikel just shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “Do as you please.”

And so, we ended up heading for the main Ruu house.

Vina Ruu slipped past Rimee Ruu and Tara, opened the door, and called inside, after which Mia Lea Ruu suddenly appeared. After a brief whispered explanation of the situation from her daughter, Mia Lea Ruu looked over the

group of six with a bright smile.

“Welcome to the Ruu house, our guests from town. So you wish to greet our clan head? We naturally welcome you to do so.”

After disappearing for a moment, Mia Lea Ruu welcomed the guests in. Since it wouldn't do to pack too many people inside, only Rimee Ruu and I accompanied them from among the workers.

“Clan head, these are our guests visiting from town.”

Donda Ruu was seated cross-legged with one knee up in the air as always.

Sitting beside him was Darmu Ruu.

Donda Ruu had bandages around his right shoulder and his right arm was in a sling. Darmu Ruu's left shoulder had seemingly already recovered, so he just had his right hand bandaged. Their injuries were honorable ones earned facing off against the lord of the forest. Still, both of them were giving off enough pressure that it was hard to tell they weren't at one-hundred percent. Actually, it might have been that they felt even more dangerous than usual, like wounded beasts.

On the wall behind them was an unbelievably massive giba pelt along with the horn from the lord of the forest they had received from Dari Sauti just the other day. The only other things that caught the eye were the spare blades and bows in the room, which only served to make the two hunters stand out all the more intensely.

Yumi gulped.

Tara clung tightly to Rimee Ruu's arm.

And by this point, Telia Mas had gone as pale as a corpse.



“Now then, please have a seat, dear guests. Don’t worry, they don’t bite,” Mia Lea Ruu said, kneeling down on Donda Ruu’s other side, opposite Darmu Ruu. I took the initiative to sit off to the right and nodded at everyone still standing.

Dora came back to his senses and sat next to me, and then Tara, Yumi, Mikel, Myme, and Telia Mas did the same in order. Rimee Ruu alone remained standing, placing her hands on Tara’s shoulders to lend her strength.

“I’m the head of the main Ruu house, Donda Ruu. This is my second son Darmu Ruu and my wife Mia Lea Ruu,” the Ruu clan head grumbled.

After wiping away the sweat from his brow, Dora replied, “I’m Dora, a resident of the Daleim lands and a vegetable seller in the post town. We’ve talked before in the past, Donda Ruu, but do you remember me?”

“I do... I’m also glad that we were able to regain our peaceful lives without needing to cross blades with the rulers of Genos.”

Dora had stood in front of Donda Ruu and the others back when they were heading to confront Cyclopeus and said he wanted to keep on doing business with us in the future.

With a large nod, Dora broke out in a cheerful smile. “I feel the same. And I’m also very grateful that you invited us here to the forest’s edge today. We’ll take care so as not to cause your people any hassle. I’m looking forward to the experience.”

Donda Ruu gave him a nod so slight it was like only his eyes moved, and then looked over the rest of the group.

“Asuta of the Fa clan informed me of who would be coming, but I’d like to know who is who. If possible, could you introduce yourselves?”

“I-I’m Tara! Rimee and Lala Ruu have always been really good friends to me! And Reina and Vina Ruu are really nice too!”

“Tara is Dora’s daughter. I’m always talking about her, right?” Rimee Ruu chimed in with an incredibly bright smile, wrapping her arms around her friend’s neck.

Tara had completely frozen up before, but now she was finally able to giggle a

bit.

“I-I’m Yumi of The Westerly Wind. I only know your family from when I’m buying a giba meal at the stalls or giba meat for my family’s inn, but I’d say I get along with everyone from the Ruu clan fairly well.”

“I’m Mikel of Turan... You really helped out with the wagon and guards for the trip to Dabagg. I know it’s late to be saying this, but I want to offer you my thanks.”

“I’m Mikel’s daughter, Myme. I plan to start running a stall selling giba meat cooking in the near future. It’s great to meet you.”

“I’m Telia Mas, the daughter of The Kimyuus’s Tail’s owner Milano Mas...”

Donda Ruu had remained silent, but in that instant his eyes flashed. “I’ve heard about you from Asuta... So, your mother’s older brother was among those attacked by the Suun clan ten years ago?”

“Yes...” Telia Mas nodded, her face still pale.

“I see...” Donda Ruu replied, his large frame swaying. “The criminals have already been judged. Not a single person of the forest’s edge is left who would commit such lawless deeds... However, all of us share responsibility for leaving the Suun clan to act freely.”

“Yes, I’ve heard all that from my father and Asuta...”

“As a leading clan head of the forest’s edge, you have my gratitude for trying to forge bonds with us despite the harm done to your precious family. Allow me to offer my apologies for the deep sadness we’ve caused you through our failure.”

Donda Ruu pressed his left fist against the floor and hung his maned head just a bit.

This was the first time I had ever seen the man bow his head to anyone.

“We believe that the only way for us to atone is for all of us at the forest’s edge to live proper lives. Please, continue watching over us to see if we’re worthy of your forgiveness.”

“Okay,” Telia Mas replied, deeply hanging her head.

I couldn't be sure of her expression, as I was seated some distance away, but I could still make out the clear droplets falling onto the fur rug.

2

"This is the kitchen."

At this point, Mia Lea Ruu had taken on the role of guiding everyone personally.

Sheera and Lala Ruu were working away in the kitchen alongside Granny Tito Min and the two guests from the Zaza clan on the preparations for tomorrow. Since tomorrow it would be myamuu giba on offer rather than the time-intensive giba burgers, they were already getting close to finishing the task.

"Oh, so you really came? Welcome to the Ruu house, little girl," Lala Ruu called out to Tara with a big smile while transferring myamuu marinade to a leather bag. Even though Tara seemed to still be feeling the shock of having met Donda Ruu, she responded with a joyful smile of her own.

"It'll be a bit tight in here with all these people. We'll head out once we're done with our work, so hold on for just a bit," Granny Tito Min chimed in.

However, Dora waved his hands to forestall her and said, "Ah, no, we're the ones interrupting, so you don't need to do that. We'll just stay out of your way off in the corner, so please, don't mind us and keep doing whatever you need to do."

"I see. Well, the young girls have been really passionate about cooking lately, so I'll just step out by myself," Granny Tito Min replied with a gentle smile, and then she left holding a massive pot. She must have been going to handle some washing.

As he watched her leave, Dora whispered to Tara, "She seems a lot nicer than the old ladies around our place, doesn't she?"

In the meantime, I went ahead and got started on my prep work too. That meant having everyone help slice up the meat that I had left in the Ruu clan's care. It was nothing but basic preparations to help make the following morning's work more efficient, though, so it didn't take all that much time. But

once the revival festival rolled around, this sort of work was sure to get a lot more troublesome too.

Once that was about done, the women from the Zaza clan called out to me. “Asuta. With these numbers it would be better if we left as well... But as members of the Zaza clan, we believe we should stay to see how you of the Ruu and Fa are deepening your ties with the townsfolk.”

“Got it. In that case, why not just participate in the study session?”

“We are grateful for your kindness...”

Though Sufira Zaza acted rather stiff for her age, ever since I saw how taken she was with Toor Deen’s sweets, she stopped feeling so difficult to handle.

Perhaps my thoughts had shown on my face, because she started to look even more standoffish than usual as she exited the kitchen alongside her clan member. Since the door was always left open for ventilation, they seemed to be planning to watch over our study session from out there.

“Now then, we normally have a study session with everyone for around two hours. It’s time we spend on thinking up new dishes and re-examining ways to use ingredients,” I explained while looking around at everyone. Even with the two women from the Zaza clan now outside, that left the eight of us who had returned from the post town, Sheera, Lala, Mia Lea, and Rimee Ruu, and the six guests, making things even more packed than usual. “I was thinking that for today, we could tackle a number of ideas involving the ingredients from Banarm that have been spending a long time on our shelves.”

“Ingredients from Banarm?”

“Yes. A man named Welhide who was among Banarm’s envoys asked me to try to come up with new uses for the fuwano, fruit wine, and vinegar they produce.”

“Ooh, so you’re even getting requests from other towns now, Asuta? You’re really something,” Dora said with an amused smile. “Well, fuwano from other towns would be business competition for someone who sells poitan like me, but I’m certainly not about to go interfering in your business. I’ll just consider it surveillance on the enemy.”

“You don’t have to worry. With all the effort it would take to transport fuwano from Banarm, it will cost more than the ordinary stuff, so I can’t really see it selling in the post town where poitan is becoming a staple food. Welhide wanted me to come up with a new dish using this stuff, with the idea being to target his sales solely at the castle town,” I explained as I scooped some of the fuwano flour packed into a bag out onto a plate. “Take a look. This is fuwano from Banarm.”

It was a dark gray, somewhat coarse fuwano flour.

The women of the forest’s edge had already seen it numerous times, so only the guests were interested in the sight.

“Hmm, that’s not an especially appetizing color.”

“Yeah. But apparently, it has even more nutritional value than the fuwano from Genos. The people in Banarm, especially those who aren’t nobles, don’t really eat proper vegetables, so they subsist on nothing but this fuwano, karon meat, and milk.”

“Ooh, so is this fuwano as nutritious as aria?”

“I don’t know what the health of the citizens of Banarm is like, so I can only guess, but based on what Welhide told me, that may be the case. Apparently, the grass the karon eat spreads so wildly that they have to take care that it doesn’t grow over into neighboring fields.”

“Ah, so that’s why vegetables are so scarce in Dabagg?” Myme chimed in, clapping her hands together and looking satisfied with that realization. “But without those abundant pastures they couldn’t satisfy the bellies of their karon, right? That’s why nobody raises them in Genos, and Dabagg and Banarm don’t grow many vegetables.”

“Supposedly so. I guess it’s so obvious to the people who live in Dabagg that they didn’t feel the need to explain it to us,” I replied as I handled the preparations. “But apparently, the upper class of Banarm eat this black fuwano with vegetables, and it doesn’t wreck their bodies from overnutrition or anything, so I was asked to find a way to use it with no need to worry about how I paired the stuff... But I figured it could have a negative impact on the sales of not only poitan but even other vegetables if I made something too

good, so I thought up something eccentric instead.” As I saw it, I didn’t want to sacrifice Dora and the other farmers for the sake of trade between Banarm and Genos, so I ended up racking my brains a bit. “Well, to jump to the conclusion, it’s something similar to the pasta I made before... Ah, now that I think about it, I still haven’t shown that to everyone in town. Pasta is a new style of food made by combining fuwano with poitan and kimyuus egg.”

“Ah, the stuff you fed to the folks in the castle town?”

“Right. I think I’ll go ahead and make it for everyone tonight. Anyway, back to the black fuwano flour, I’m going to try mixing it with poitan and preparing something similar to pasta. And if the castle town accepts it, then that should help you sell even more poitan.”

“Yes, we certainly haven’t been getting calls for poitan from the castle town. If this works out, we’ll need to expand our fields even further,” Dora replied with a joyful look on his face.

I smiled back at him and then got to work on the task at hand.

“This black fuwano has a more subdued taste than the white fuwano from Genos. The texture is coarse, the color dull, and it’s packed with nutrition. Considering all that, it may use not only a different variety of fuwano, but a different method of grinding as well. Well, I don’t know anything about how fuwano is refined to begin with, so I can only imagine. At any rate, I figured I could make use of the slightly sticky texture to prepare a somewhat different dish than pasta.”

“Ooh. But if it’s got less taste than our fuwano, doesn’t that make it similar to poitan? And won’t they just become ever weaker if you mix them together?” Yumi spoke up. The Westerly Wind avoided using expensive ingredients, so she was asking out of pure curiosity.

“No, it was closer to the ideal that I was aiming for when combined than using black fuwano on its own. Could you give it a taste once I make it?”

“Of course! That’s pretty much why I came!” Yumi replied, seemingly back to her normal self. As I glanced her way out of the corner of my eye, I went ahead and blended the black fuwano with some poitan flour.

The ratio was one to four, with more of the black fuwano. I slowly added water while quickly stirring rather than kneading it. Since I wasn't actually making pasta, I didn't need any kimyuus egg or reten oil. I split apart the flour whenever it started to clump up, and just kept on adding water bit by bit.

Once I added a little over half as much water as there was flour everything was good and moist, at which point it was finally time to start kneading. First I used my fists to get it gathered up fairly well, and then I folded it in on itself and kept on thoroughly kneading with my palms.

Once I had it made up into a proper dough, I moved it over to a floured tray and stretched it out with a pole. When it looked to be around two or three millimeters thick, I sprinkled more flour on top and folded it in half twice, then sliced into it using a cutting board. Thus far, it was the same process as making pasta.

"Now we just need to boil it to finish it off, so let's go ahead and make a stock first."

For the stock, I used smoked fish and seaweed, then added tau oil and sugar for flavoring. And for peace of mind, I added a bit of fruit wine as a secret ingredient, since there wasn't any mirin or sake to be had.

"So those are the smoked fish and seaweed delivered from the capital? Nobody in the post town can afford to use ingredients that expensive," Telia Mas interjected, speaking up for the first time in a while. She didn't look all that shaken up despite being faced with such a huge crowd of people from the forest's edge. I had been worried about what sort of impact meeting with Donda Ruu would have on her, but now I breathed a sigh of relief.

"But these ingredients let you make a simple and delicious soup. If the day comes when we can order a lot of them from the capital, that may lower the price a bit. Hopefully the elites of Genos can help make that happen."

"I personally never expected nobles to do anything before, but the second son of our land's ruling house may be able to do something about it," Dora said with a bright smile. He was of course talking about Polarth, of the house of Count Daleim.

At that point it occurred to me that our two guests who had been here before

were being awfully quiet, and when I turned to look, I found Myme and Mikel watching me work with deadly serious gazes. This study session was their main purpose for coming along today.

“Okay, that should be about right for the sauce. Sheera Ruu, could you handle the rest?”

“Yes, of course.”

Sheera Ruu already knew the steps, and so she filled a fresh pot with water and placed the boiling pot in it. The thought was that while it could be eaten warm, it would be easier if it was cooled.

“Now we cook the noodles from before in boiling water. Ah...back in my home country, we called dough made into this shape ‘noodles.’”

As I explained, I tossed the noodles into another pot that was now brought to a boil. After that, I used a grigee chopstick to roughly separate them. For the cooking time, I estimated it to be around two or three minutes.

Now that I thought about it, it would certainly be nice to get ahold of the hourglasses I had requested from Polarth soon. Though I had gotten entirely used to cooking by feel, I was sure that having a tool like that would be greatly appreciated by the chefs of the forest’s edge as well.

“Once it’s boiled, you wash it off with cold water atop the netting. Then you just serve it up on a plate and it’s good to go.”

“It’s done? Are you not going to add it to the broth from before?”

“Nope. This is meant to be eaten by dipping it in a bit of broth with each bite.”

In other words, it was a dish modeled on zaru soba.

It would be possible to make it using the white fuwano from Genos too, but in terms of texture, I felt the white stuff was more suited to pasta and udon, while the black fuwano was a better fit for soba.

“You’re free to eat it however you like, but this is how we did it back in my home country,” I said, grabbing a bit of it with my homemade chopsticks. “But if that’s difficult, you can eat it like pasta, with one of the wooden spoons with three prongs cut into it.”

But since we were talking zaru soba, I really did want to have folks use chopsticks and slurp it instead. I had been using pasta as a springboard to move into other types of noodles recently, so I wanted to try to spread the use of chopsticks bit by bit as well.

“Ooh, you didn’t use meat or vegetables at all. You just boiled that dried fish and seaweed.”

“That’s right. Back in my home country, lots of people would use this dish on its own as a light afternoon meal, but I’m sure that would feel lacking to the people of Genos. If I pair it with meat or vegetables, I think it should be able to keep up with the sales we’ve seen up till now,” I replied as Rimee Ruu and the others helped portion the dish out onto some plates. “And I’m sure this won’t be enough for all of you either, so please give it a try while imagining it being paired with a meat or vegetable side.”

It was finally time to give it a taste.

The members of the group from the forest’s edge had already tried it, and smoothly ate the fuwano soba just like they would with pasta. Though it had been delayed because of the trip to Dabagg and the matter with the Sauti clan, I had already unveiled the dish twice at study sessions.

Ultimately, Reina, Sheera, and Rimee Ruu, along with Toor Deen had decided to try using chopsticks. Rimee Ruu had said, “It looks tastier eating it Asuta’s way!” while the others were just highly curious people. And so, they ended up attempting to help spread the use of chopsticks at my request.

Then there were the six guests.

The first among them to speak up was Yumi. “This is interesting! It’s hard to imagine this was made with fuwano and poitan!”

“That’s true. If it sits in the broth too long, the flavor gets rather concentrated, but I also find it just plain good,” Dora agreed.

Meanwhile, Mikel wore a serious look on his face. “This certainly is a mysterious dish. It’s as if you went out of your way to make fuwano more difficult to eat... And yet, cutting it thinly like this is how you were able to create this very particular mouthfeel. I find it difficult to form any impressions...”

“But this broth is delicious, isn’t it? Smoked fish and seaweed certainly are amazing ingredients, to allow you to create such a deep flavor in so short a time just by boiling them!” Myme added.

As they had skipped right over pasta to this fuwano soba, the guests were unsurprisingly looking taken aback. But, well, even if the order was reversed, they would be getting to try out plenty of pasta tonight.

I told them, “I also believe this would go well with the addition of some herbs or a little dried kiki, or maybe even sprinkling grated gigo over the top, but I’m still experimenting with all that. For now, I was thinking of having the folks from Banarm give it a try like this.”

“Well, folks from the castle town may find a dish like this really interesting. And if you say it needs poitan, then that means I’ll be able to expand my fields to their limits.” With those words from Dora, the unveiling of the black fuwano came to a close.

Next up came the Banarm fruit wine and vinegar, which were like white wine and white wine vinegar.

“Yumi, you should already be plenty accustomed to this white mamaria vinegar.”

“Yup! It’s a bit expensive, but it really makes the mayonnaise taste a whole lot better! All the customers who order okonomiyaki love it.”

“The dark red mamaria vinegar sold in Genos is pretty flavorful and sour, but that can end up ruining the overall taste, so I’d say it’s best to use whichever kind is best suited to each dish.”

With that said, I personally had a much easier time finding uses for the white mamaria vinegar than the balsamic-like red mamaria vinegar. In fact, I had already switched over to the stuff from Banarm for the sweet and sour giba served at The Kimyuus’s Tail.

“And the white fruit wine should be usable in ordinary stews. The impression I get is that it’s probably a better fit with kimyuus than giba.”

“Even though they’re both fruit wine, they taste totally different, don’t they? I feel like it’s going to knock me over, seeing one new ingredient after another

like this,” Myme said, looking overcome with joy.

“Okay, how about we try to make a stew using this fruit wine in the time we have left? It could be useful as a flavoring for soups too,” I said.

With that, we split off into separate groups and started sharing ideas.

As he glanced around, Dora suddenly sighed. “So you study cooking every single day like this? It makes sense now, how you can all make such delicious food.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Normally, we’re busy with the day’s work and can’t spend quite this much time on our studies, though. But now that we’re making so much money from our business in the post town, we can afford to spend some of our time on this.”

“Yeah! My dad is supporting us just fine, so I’m able to make time to study my cooking too!” Myme said with an innocent smile, but it didn’t seem all that straightforward to me. Of course Mikel was supporting them financially, but while he was out, Myme must have been taking care of all the housework on her own. Not just the cooking, but the cleaning, the laundry, and the shopping for the day, and then using her remaining time to study. It was unavoidable, considering Mikel had lost a lot of movement in the fingers on his right hand.

She was only around ten or so, but she was *that* passionate about cooking. Rather than the sharp sense of taste she had inherited from her father or the cooking knowledge he had imparted to her, I thought that that was her greatest strength.

“Hey there! Things are sounding pretty lively around here,” a voice suddenly called out from outside. Then, Ludo Ruu peeked his head in through the open kitchen door.

“Ah, it’s Ludo Ruu!” Tara exclaimed, starting to step forward only to freeze in place. There was a massive black shape behind the young hunter.

“You sure are back early.”

“Yeah, we actually caught a giba in a trap for the first time in a while. We decided to carry it back in a rush so the mundt wouldn’t get at it.”

“You caught a giba?” Dora questioned with a stiff expression as he walked over to Ludo Ruu. Yumi followed after him, her eyes sparkling with curiosity, along with a timid-looking Tara and Telia Mas, who had a serious expression on her face.

Ludo Ruu and Shin Ruu were carrying a grigee pole with a giba that must’ve been around a hundred kilos or so tied to it. I couldn’t spot any wounds on the carcass aside from the bloody mark along its throat. They must have succeeded in bloodletting it.

At that, Dora gave an oddly heavy sigh. “This certainly is quite the fine giba... It’s a size bigger than the ones that we’ve caught in our traps.”

“Woow, this is my first time seeing a giba ever! Amazing! So this thing turns into that delicious meat?” Yumi chimed in, filled with admiration.

Besides Dora, who had caught some in the traps around his field, this was probably the first time any of our guests had seen one. As they stared at the massive giba, Yumi seemed impressed, Tara seemed to be intimidated, and Telia Mas had her arms wrapped around herself.

“You wouldn’t stand a chance if you got stabbed by tusks this thick! Hey, so did you guys catch it?”

“Hmm? We just lifted it up from where it was caught in a pitfall and slit its throat, so it’s not like a big achievement for any of us. Actually, who are you anyway?”

“Huh?! We’ve met lots of times when you guys were guarding Asuta! Not that we’ve ever been properly introduced, though,” Yumi retorted, clearly displeased.

“Hmm...” Ludo Ruu thought with a light tilt of his head. “Well, whatever. We’ll have to put off skinning this guy so we can head back out into the forest. I’m gonna be there at the Fa house for dinner, so we can save introductions for then.”

“You’re going into the forest again after catching one this big?”

“Yeah, since there will be fewer giba around here soon. We’ve got to hunt them while we still can.”

Dora sighed again. "Please take care while you're doing your work. I'll be praying to the western god that you return safely."

"Yeah, thanks." Ludo Ruu still seemed to be more or less in hunter mode. Though his eyes weren't blazing, he looked even tougher than usual.

With that, Shin and Ludo Ruu silently disappeared into the butchering room. Meanwhile, another huge figure appeared from beyond the building. Instantly, Yumi shrieked, "Aah!" and for some reason started clinging to me. "I-I-It's him! What's he doing here?!"

It was Mida, carrying another giba in the hundred-kilo range all on his own. I could hear him breathing heavily as he slowly approached.

"Well, Mida was judged for his crimes too and is living as a member of the Ruu clan. He won't do anything violent anymore, so don't worry."

In recent years, it had been less Zattsu Suun and his ilk and more Mida and Doddoo who directly terrorized the post town. Although Mida was only fourteen, he was just under two meters tall and so large that I couldn't even hazard a guess as to his weight, making him feel almost more than human. Having run into him before at the stalls, Yumi didn't let go of me even after I offered that explanation.

"Asuta, I messed up the bloodletting..." Mida said, talking to me just the same as always. "And the horns flew off somewhere too. I did bad..."

At that point, Mida slowly turned to the side, prompting Yumi to hug me even tighter. Not just the horns, but half of the giba's entire head was missing.

"Y-You finished it off, Mida? Considering you weren't using giba summoning fruit, that sure is amazing."

"Yeah... But I failed with the bloodletting, so you can't sell it, right?"

"What's most important is hunting as many giba as you can, isn't it? Worrying about the meat and horns is like putting the cart before the totes. You did a fine job, Mida."

"Really?"

After stopping for a bit, Mida's cheeks suddenly started trembling. Though I

figured that was because he was happy, Yumi just hugged my torso ever tighter still.

“Hey, Mida! We’re heading back into the forest once we get these guys hung up, so hurry and finish your part of the job!” Ludo Ruu called out.

At that, Mida quietly said, “Goodbye...” and then disappeared into the butchering room.

“Ugh. That caught me off guard. I got a little weak in the knees there. Sorry, Asuta, but can I lean on you for a bit longer?”

“Y-Yeah, but could you hurry up and recover faster?”

Telia Mas had remained silent for a while, but now she approached us. “Asuta, you said he was judged, but just what sort of crime did that man of the forest’s edge commit, and what punishment did he receive?”

“Who, Mida? He was a part of the main Suun house that was responsible for all those awful crimes, so he had to cut all ties with his family and had his clan name taken from him. If he keeps living properly, some day he’ll be granted the Ruu name, but until then he won’t be allowed to marry.”

“I see...”

“Oh, and he’s much younger than he looks, so he had nothing to do with the crimes of the previous head of the Suun whatsoever. He did pillage the fruits of Morga and supposedly smashed some stalls in the post town, but nobody ever taught him those things were wrong, and Cyclaeus dismissed any crimes the Suun committed. That’s why the people of the forest’s edge feel that if he lives properly from now on, he can atone for everything he’s done.”

Telia Mas gave a small nod and closed her eyes.

“I see. The people of the forest’s edge are even stricter on their relatives than the townsfolk are, if they’ll even punish someone so young that had nothing to do with the most serious of those crimes,” Dora interjected, as if trying to smooth things over.

“Yeah...” Telia Mas said quietly, opening her eyes. “My feelings are still so jumbled that I’m not sure I can find the words to express myself properly... But I

really am glad I came here to the settlement at the forest's edge."

Having said that, Telia Mas gave a fleeting, yet very definite smile.

3

Once the study session was over, we walked around the Ruu branch houses for a bit to take in everyone's daily lives, then headed to the Fa house.

Rimee Ruu also took the Ruu clan's wagon, and we once again split into two groups in order to ride down the path through the forest's edge. Since Toor Deen and Yun Sudra ended up deciding to come along to watch me cooking dinner today, we were able to head straight there.

Having heard about our guests, some folks from the Fou, Deen, and Liddo clans had gathered at the Fa house. After greeting them, I went ahead and invited the townsfolk inside for an audience with my clan head.

Incidentally, since Saris Ran and Aimu Fou were visiting again today, Tara and Yumi got really excited.

"Ah, a baby! So cute!" the younger of the two squealed.

"Ohhh, even though he's so little, you can still tell that he's a person of the forest's edge."

Aimu Fou stared blankly up at them, but when they reached out for him he toddled away and clung to Ai Fa's leg. But seeing him act so adorably just made them squirm with happiness ever more.

"I can't get enough of him! Ah, I should have greeted you first... Thank you for inviting us here today!" Yumi said, not waiting to be introduced since she was already acquainted with Ai Fa.

With a serious look on her face as Aimu Fou still clung to her, Ai Fa replied, "Indeed. As you can see, this is a small house, but I welcome all of you as the clan head of the Fa. Though that's more Asuta's job..."

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to some delicious food!" Tara said. She and Dora were of course even better acquainted with Ai Fa than Yumi was, and Mikel and Myme went without saying. Telia Mas then introduced herself, as she barely

knew my clan head, which quickly brought all that to a close.

On the way to the cooking hut where the women from the forest's edge were waiting, Dora spoke up. "On top of the members of the Ruu, right now even your clan head is injured. It's really hitting me just how much they're risking their lives when they go out hunting."

"Yeah. Ai Fa and Donda Ruu are both first-rate hunters... But you saw those huge giba horns on the wall in our house and back at the Ruu settlement, right? They came from the animal that caused those injuries."

"Huh? Those were real giba horns?! I thought for sure that they were decorations made from stone or something..."

"No, they're real. They came from a nightmarishly massive giba."

As we walked along, Dora laughed listlessly "Ah ha ha. Just imagining it is enough to make my knees shake. The hunters from the forest's edge really are unbelievably strong."

"That's true. I'm proud to be able to call them my comrades."

It was around then that I heard another wagon approaching from behind us.

I had thought it was some folks from the Ruu clan coming to deliver something we had forgotten, but that didn't turn out to be the case. It was the tolos and wagon purchased for the nearby clans to do their shopping with, coming toward us along the path.

We stopped and waited beside the house for it to arrive. The one holding the reins of the tolos named Fafa was an older woman who was married to the head of the Ran clan.

"Ah, it seems we made it in time. Asuta, these folks would like to watch you work as well."

Four women and two men got down from the wagon. Of the six, I only recognized one of the men, who approached with a sour look on his face.

"The head of the Beim clan. What brings you here?"

"It's nothing all that important. I just heard that a good number of townsfolk were visiting today, so I came to have a look. This man here belongs to the

Dagora clan, under the Beim.”

The Beim clan head and the Fou head, Baadu Fou, were the two who insisted on joining the meetings between the three leading clan heads and the nobles of Genos as observers. He was a man in the prime of his life with a flat and stern face that reminded me of a samurai crab.

This was my first time hearing of the Dagora, but the Beim were opposed to our doing business in the post town, and their subordinates probably shared that opinion. Though I didn’t sense any animosity, he was wearing just as sour of a look as the Beim clan head.

“We have no intention of interfering since the leading clan heads gave their permission, but we want to observe carefully whether or not these townsfolk truly mean no harm.”

“I see. I’ve got no objections, of course, but could I ask that you discuss it with Ai Fa first?”

“Of course, we will do so. And on an unrelated topic...” the Beim clan head started, his flat face distorting in a rather unusual manner. “The Zaza and Dom women are learning how to make delicious food from the Ruu and Rutim clans now, correct? In that case, I believe we should do the same in order to determine the validity of the Fa clan’s actions... Would you approve of us going ahead with that?”

“Of course. So, those women are from the Beim clan?”

“One each from the Beim and Dagora, and the other two belong to the Gaaz and Ratsu clans.”

Once he said that, the four women all gave deep bows. The Gaaz and Ratsu approved of our business in the post town, and even lent us their aid when we didn’t have enough giba meat to run our business. However, since they weren’t located all that close to the Fa house, we hadn’t had a chance to grow closer on a personal level.

I tilted my head a bit and wondered what all the commotion was about. The Ran woman gave me the answer with an apologetic smile as she tied the reins of the tolos to a nearby tree. “The Gaaz and Ratsu women haven’t been able to

receive cooking lessons from you since their clans aren't located very close, right? But they reached out to us because they figured they could commute here with the use of a wagon. We're sorry for deciding on our own to use the wagon for this when you're the one who bought it for us..."

"No, there's nothing wrong with that at all. Actually, I should have thought of this myself and reached out," I said, bowing back to the women. "It's thanks to the assistance of the Gaaz and Ratsu that the Fa clan has always been able to continue with our business instead of needing to take time off, and I'm truly grateful for that. Please, let me do what I can to help you in return."

"Oh, think nothing of it. After all, the Gaaz and the Ratsu gained a great deal of wealth from selling meat to the Fa clan."

Two of the four women stepped forward, politely bowing.

"The men learned bloodletting and we now know how to bake poitan and the like, but we still haven't reached the point of making truly delicious meals. We would be so happy to have the opportunity to learn from you."

"And we would also like to ask that you teach the subordinate clans of the Gaaz and Ratsu as well. Whenever the wagon is available, would it be possible to invite women from those clans as well?"

I could see no reason whatsoever to refuse.

During the previous break period, we had spread bloodletting and butchering techniques to a variety of clans, following a proposal by Raielfam Sudra. The meat prepared by those clans allowed us to keep on doing business until the break period ended, so I was majorly indebted to them as well.

"Well then, could I ask that you all introduce yourselves to my clan head as well? We'll be getting ready at the stove to the rear."

"Understood," the women replied and headed back toward the house.

After watching them leave, Yumi suddenly slapped me on the back.

"You sure are amazing, Asuta! It really is something, how you have so many people relying on you!"

"Ow... Well, that's because there was no custom of enjoying meals at the

forest's edge. So even someone like me was able to be of use."

"What do you mean, 'even'? Your skills were good enough to get you summoned by the nobles. There isn't anybody else like that in all of the post town."

"Actually, I recently heard the second son of the house of Daleim heap a ton of praise on the owner of The Sledgehammer, so I'd imagine the number of people in the post town who are that skilled is going to keep growing as they learn how to handle finer ingredients."

"Wait, really?! That's not good. We can't keep taking it easy over at our place..." Yumi said, and then she turned toward Telia Mas. "By the way, will The Kimyuus's Tail be running a stall for the revival festival? Most of the big inns are going to be selling their cooking, yeah?"

"No, since my father and I aren't that skilled... And we can't see a reason to hire people just to run a stall."

"You've got no ambition. Still, at our place we only ever manage to sell meals with giba. And we'd never beat Asuta and the others, so it'd just be a waste to open a stall."

"That's not true at all. The okonomiyaki you serve at The Westerly Wind is a dish people bought from stalls all the time back in my home country. If you can just revise it to not be so difficult to hold and eat, you should be able to get plenty of customers," I chimed in, and then I turned toward Telia Mas. "And weren't you talking about how you're trying out karon torso meat over at The Kimyuus's Tail? I'd imagine you could use that to make something that would attract attention."

Polarth was taking steps to spread the use of karon torso meat alongside milk fat and the other new ingredients. With Tanto's Blessing first among them, there would surely be a number of inns selling it at their stalls.

However, Telia Mas shook her head and replied, "No. We may be able to use karon torso meat in our dining hall, but I don't think my father is even considering running a stall. He wouldn't want to interfere with your business selling giba cooking."

“That shouldn’t matter to you. Like I told The Sledgehammer’s owner, I...”

“No.” Telia Mas cut me off. However, she was wearing a warm smile across her face. “If we were to open a stall, it would be with giba meat rather than karon. I’m sure that’s what my father would do.”

She was probably right.

“I understand,” I replied with a smile of my own. “If you do happen to open a stall, then let’s discuss the menu together. I’d be thrilled to see all sorts of stalls out there selling things made with giba meat.”

“But that would cause your profits to drop... Or at least, that’s how I used to see it,” Yumi interjected with a grin. “You’ve been selling tons of raw meat, and thanks to that, all those people we just met have been profiting too, right? I think I finally understand what it is you’re trying to do.”

I was incredibly grateful to hear that. I had been able to show everyone so much in just this one day. With a feeling of great satisfaction, I set about preparing dinner.

4

The day went on like that until sunset at the lower sixth hour, at which point we held a welcome dinner for everyone at the Fa house.

The women from the other clans had returned to their own homes, leaving just our six guests, Rimee Ruu, and a late arrival, Ludo Ruu.

Ai Fa had said it was her first time welcoming so many guests. She didn’t look especially happy or anything, but she must have been able to relax at least a little with Rimee Ruu sitting next to her.

“Hey, can we hurry up and get the formalities out of the way? I’m starving here!” Ludo Ruu urged from his spot between Rimee Ruu and Tara.

Ai Fa shot him a somewhat annoyed look. “You mean the pre-meal chant? There are only the two of us here at the Fa house, so we each just take care of it on our own.”

“Oh, so that’s how you do it in the Fa house? But Rimee and I are here today,

so it's probably a good idea to follow tradition."

"I see..." Ai Fa stated, straightening up her posture. "That may be true. Well then, you guests should follow your own traditions and begin eating. We people of the forest's edge will be offering a prayer to the forest." With that, Ai Fa began reciting the chant she usually just murmured under her breath. "We give thanks for the blessings of the forest and offer our gratitude to Asuta and Rimee Ruu, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night..."

The two Ruu siblings and I repeated after her.

Myme and Mikel silently bowed their heads, while the other four guests simply said, "Thank you."

"Still, this is quite the feast. I'm gonna enjoy bragging about it to the old ladies back at our place," Dora said while looking from dish to dish as if hesitating over what to try first.

For today's menu, I had wanted to be a bit more extravagant than usual. That meant five dishes: a main dish, a side dish, soup, a couple grain options, and dessert, all of them quite substantial.

For the main dish, I had gone for the obvious choice and prepared sirloin steaks. I figured the townsfolk wouldn't have jaws and teeth as sturdy as the hunters of the forest's edge, so I had decided on a thickness where I could just barely chew through them without effort.

To accompany that, I had made mashed potatoes...or perhaps it would be more accurate to call them mashed chatchi. It required quite a bit of chatchi to extract starch, so I came up with this dish to effectively use up all the leftovers. Once the starch had been extracted, I boiled the chatchi, then after mashing it, I folded in milk and milk fat. I figured this recipe was the best way to make use of lots of fine slices of chatchi.

Furthermore, I had prepared a sort of gravy made with meat juices, fruit wine, and myamuu to pour over the top. It was a sauce I had gotten plenty of use out of for a while, but I could get closer to the proper taste by using fuwano flour and karon milk, and it went wonderfully with the steak and mashed chatchi.

For the side dish, I had made a sauté of giba bacon, aria, nanaar, and the

pseudo-brown beech mushroom. In order to let the taste of the milk fat stand out, I hadn't used any sort of sauce. It was rather heavy for an intermezzo, but I wanted to show off the giba bacon while also providing plenty of vegetables, which was how I ended up selecting the dish.

The soup I had prepared was a creamy stew with sausages and rib meat. The other ingredients I had added were aria, chatchi, nenon, and the pseudo-common mushroom, and I'd been able to make a nice béchamel sauce using milk fat, fuwano flour, and karon milk, which reminded me a lot of the flavor from back home.

As for the grains, I was offering not just the usual baked poitan, but also a pasta with meat sauce. I'd used plenty of minced giba, tarapa, and aria in the sauce, and then sprinkled grated gyama dried milk over the top. I had tried out all sorts of flavoring with the pasta, so this was a recipe I had some confidence in, along with the cream sauce version I had made. I had spent a lot of effort on developing tarapa sauces and wanted to try making ketchup later, so tarapa had ended up being one of the key weapons in my arsenal.

Lastly, for dessert Rimee Ruu had helped out by making a steamed pudding that used karon milk. The dish could be called a sweet chawanmushi, but since it was outside of my field of expertise I couldn't judge whether or not it was worthy of the name. Still, it was undeniably tasty. There was kimyuus egg dissolved into the karon milk, and sugar, honey, and milk fat added flavor. After it had been steamed until it solidified, Rimee Ruu had added arow sauce on top at my suggestion.

The soft texture combined splendidly with the flavor of the karon milk, and if she had served it at the tea party for those noble ladies, it surely would have been received just as well as her chatchi mochi. Rimee Ruu had also surpassed me when it came to handling berries like arow at this point.

While we were preparing this dinner, the women from the other clans visiting the Fa house for the first time were taken aback by how luxurious the meal was. Since other clans would have had trouble preparing such elaborate dishes that used this many ingredients, I told them I would start giving them more practical lessons from tomorrow onward. But for today, I wanted to give my all for our guests.

“So this is that pasta stuff, huh? It’s definitely way tastier than that dish with the black fuwano from this afternoon!” Yumi skillfully dug into the pasta with a three-pronged spork.

Beside her, Telia Mas took hold of a plate of creamy stew and gave a sigh. “The karon milk soup we serve at our place is a simpler version of this dish, isn’t it? That recipe is pretty good too, of course, but it doesn’t compare to this.”

“The stew is delicious, right?! I love it!” Rimee Ruu happily chimed in, and Telia Mas smiled at her. It was clear from her tone just how much she had opened up to the older girl.

“This giba meat is grilled exquisitely too! You did a wonderful job drawing out the flavor of the ingredients!” Myme added, looking greatly satisfied. I really was honored to receive such praise from someone with a tongue as refined as hers. “You cooked it in a covered pan after grilling the surface, didn’t you? Even though it’s this thick, there aren’t any tough bits left at all, so you must have been quite thorough with your preparations.”

“Yeah. Nothing we have gets this tasty just from being grilled. It really is something else,” Yumi agreed with a smile. Though it was her first time meeting Myme, she was acting completely open around the girl. She was really showing off her social skills today. Yumi then turned toward Dora. “By the way, you sure have been awfully quiet. Are you enjoying what you’re eating that much?”

“Honestly, I was shocked by how delicious it is. Isn’t this bacon the same kind of thing as jerky?” Dora had been eating the bacon, vegetable, and mushroom sauté. “I don’t eat jerky all that often, but this is superb. Are folks who travel around always eating stuff that’s this delicious?”

“No, this was prepared in a way that prioritized taste over preservation. It might last about a month on the road, but it’s too expensive for that, so it’s not really something we can sell on its own,” I explained.

“I see. I don’t travel, myself, but I’d certainly like to see you use this in the food you sell at your stalls,” Dora said with a hearty chuckle.

Tara looked up from slurping his stew with a big smile of her own. “By the way, Kamyua and Leito still haven’t come back to Genos, have they?”

“Who are you talking about?” Yumi questioned, turning toward her.

“Huh? You don’t know him? You know, that tall blond guy who’s a bodyguard.”

“Oh, you mean that lanky old-timer who looks like a northerner? He helped Asuta out when he was in a real pinch, right?” I wondered which pinch she was talking about specifically for a moment, but then I remembered. When Tei Suun attacked me, Kamyua Yoshu had gotten between Ai Fa and Melfried at a critical moment. “So you know him too, Tara? Who’s this Leito, then?”

“Leito is a boy who lived at The Kimyuus’s Tail up until two years ago. He should have been eight or nine back then. Do you not remember him?” Telia Mas chimed in.

“Hmm...” Yumi pondered with a tilt of her head. “I didn’t go to the meetings two years ago, so I don’t think so.”

“I see. Anyway, Kamyua and Leito worked real hard to beat those bad nobles! Right, Asuta?” Tara said.

“Yeah. If Kamyua hadn’t worked with both the castle and the forest’s edge, it probably would have been real difficult to bring the crimes of the Suun clan and house of Turan to light.”

But rather than basking in the accolades for that accomplishment, Kamyua Yoshu had simply departed Genos after everything was settled. Thinking back, Marstein and Melfried worked for Genos, and the people of the forest’s edge did the same for their home, but it was an outsider like Kamyua Yoshu who had spurred them to action. It was a little late to be thinking it, but he truly was an unusual man.

“Speaking of traveling, that easterner will be coming back to Genos at some point too, right?” Mikel commented in an unusually heavy tone.

The only easterner he knew well enough to comment on was Shumiral, the leader of the merchant group known as the Silver Vase.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “He said he would return in half a year, so if things go smoothly, that should be in about two months.”

“Oh right, Shumiral was the one who introduced you to Asuta, wasn’t he?” Ludo Ruu said while stuffing his cheeks with mashed chatchi and steak. “And that was so you could help us expose the crimes of those nobles too. It’s strange to think about how that led to us eating dinner together now.”

It certainly was an unusual twist of fate.

Thinking about it, Yumi and Mikel didn’t know Kamyua Yoshu’s name, while Dora and Telia Mas hadn’t even known Shumiral existed. But along the way, our fates and the ties that bound us started getting entangled bit by bit, leading us here to the same place. Perhaps Kamyua Yoshu and Shumiral would form a connection with all of them eventually as well.

At least, that’s what I figured they were getting at. How it was so mysterious, the way people ended up coming together.

“You know, we’ve got people from all throughout Genos here,” Dora said to Mikel and Myme with an amused grin. “Tara and I are from the Daleim lands, you two are from the Turan lands, Yumi and Telia Mas come from the post town ruled by the house of Saturas, and everyone else is from the settlement at the forest’s edge. You’d just need somebody from the castle town to complete the set.”

“That’s true. Maybe someday we’ll be able to make that happen,” I said.

It would be hard to get a noble to come, but Yang and Roy lived in the castle town too. And they’d already broken with the way typical nobles would never show themselves in the post town, so maybe they’d eventually start to grow closer to the people around town if they kept it up. If that led to the societal borders separating us starting to crumble bit by bit, Genos would become an even nicer place to live.

“Hey Rimee Ruu, do you want to come to the Daleim lands again sometime?” Tara asked her young friend on the other side of Ludo Ruu, wearing a smile all the while.

“Yeah!” Rimee Ruu nodded back with a smile of her own. Then she looked up at her older brother, who was greedily devouring mashed chatchi. “You should come along too, Ludo! There’re all sorts of vegetables there, and it’s really interesting!”

“What’s so exciting about staring at vegetables? Well, I guess Dan Rutim said he had a really great time...” Ludo Ruu replied after gulping down a mouthful of chatchi. “I suppose I can discuss it with our old man and see if we can head there during the break period.”

“Huh?! That’s almost here already, isn’t it?!” Rimee Ruu exclaimed, placing her hands on her brother’s crossed legs and leaning forward. Mirroring her, Tara also leaned in.

With their intense gazes boring into his cheeks from both sides, Ludo Ruu hurriedly replied, “That’s right.” And then he turned toward me, “Hey Asuta, you guys will be going into town during that revival festival thing, right?”



“Huh? Yeah, that’s our plan.”

“I see. Normally, the people of the forest’s edge don’t visit town when that’s going on. Since there are so many outsiders pouring in during the festival, we pretty much just try to buy all the produce we need in advance and stay away until the silver month.”

I had already heard similarly from Ai Fa. Even without looking at how things went in Dabagg, it was obvious that while folks from outside of Genos had less reason to take exception to the people of the forest’s edge, they would probably still get nervous. And since it was a festival, there would be a lot of people cutting loose and drinking during the day, which made caution all the more necessary.

“Anyway, the Ruu clan will be on our break period soon, so I figure we should be able to offer some men to guard you again during the festival... And in that case, why not stop by the Daleim lands on the way back?”

“Yay!” two voices cheered in unison, and Ludo Ruu received hugs from the small figures on either side of him.

However, the young hunter paid them no heed and just kept on eating at the same pace. “Let me just say, if our old man is against it then that’ll be the end of the matter. And we have to make sure it works out for Dora too.”

“Ah, if anyone from the forest’s edge wants to come over, I’ll make it work out. It’s true that we’ll be real busy with work in the near future, but we can at least entertain guests,” Dora replied with a bright smile. “Still, I think that’s the first time you’ve called me by name, Ludo Ruu. It makes me happy to hear, somehow.”

“Hmm? I’ve got it memorized, so why would I not use your name? And you’re, um...Miyu?”

“Yumi! I’m Yumi, and this is Telia Mas!”

“What’s it matter if it’s Yumi or Miyu?”

“It matters a whole lot! You’ve got a cute face, but you can be a real clod!”

“Yeah, and you’re real noisy despite how seductive you look.”

Dora broke out in hearty laughter at that, and Telia Mas giggled. Rimee Ruu and Tara remained clinging to Ludo Ruu as they exchanged smiles, and Mikel and Myme quietly discussed my cooking.

After looking over to check in on each of them, I turned toward my clan head, who had remained silent all this time.

“Hey, Ai Fa.”

“Yes, this is delicious.”

“No, that’s not what I was gonna say...”

“Are you asking about the guards, then? I, of course, intend to accompany you to town. After all, I won’t be able to work as a hunter for the time being anyway.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But that’s not what I was going to say either...” I set down my plate and brought my mouth close to Ai Fa’s ear. “I’ve been a little worried since you’ve been so quiet. After all, you don’t really like it when things are this lively, right?”

Staring back at me out of the corner of her eye for a moment, Ai Fa then similarly brought her mouth in close. “Such worries are unnecessary. It’s true that I’m not fond of lively events...but right now, I feel happy.”

“Happy? Really?”

“Of course. Our clan is striving to bring prosperity to the forest’s edge. And you yourself said deepening our bonds with the townsfolk is important so that giba meat can be exchanged for coins, did you not?” Ai Fa very calmly stated. “Though I am not the kind of person to go out and forge such bonds myself, I always feel confident that the path we’ve chosen is the right one when I look at the delight on their faces. So of course I’m happy...”

“I see,” I replied with a sigh. A deep joy was filling me up inside. “It makes me feel that much better when I know you think the same as me, Ai Fa.”

My clan head pulled back and stared at me with an incredibly gentle gaze. “Once that revival festival begins, you’ll be even busier. But if you believe you are following the correct path, then you simply need to carry out your work.”

“Got it. Let’s both give it our all, Ai Fa.”

My clan head didn’t seem to be able to restrain herself from smiling as she nodded back. “Right.”

After burning that expression into my memory, I turned back toward the others. “The food will be gone before much longer, so I’d say it’s time to get the post-meal sweet ready. Rimee Ruu, could you lend me a hand?”

“Yeah!” the young chef energetically replied as she rose to her feet.

Tara clapped her hands together and said, “Yay!” When I said the sweet would be something new, Tara was the most excited about it.

Everyone else’s eyes were also shining with anticipation, and they all wore smiles. Dinner would be over soon, but the connection between us would last much longer. And I was sure they would be invited here to the forest’s edge countless times in the future.

On top of that, the sun god’s revival festival would begin soon. If the men ended up going to town as guards, I was sure it would lead to even more new bonds being forged.

Today was the tenth of the violet month. The sun god’s revival festival would begin in the back half of the month, so it would soon be here.

Intermission: People of the North

“Whoa, now that’s really something!” I exclaimed in surprise as we were heading toward the space for our stalls at the usual time on the eleventh of the violet month. On the other side of our roped-off outdoor restaurant situated at the northern extreme of the stall spaces, work had begun on cutting down the neighboring thicket.

The space that had previously been left open was now filled with a mountain of cut down branches and dug up tree roots. Fresh leaves were flying as far as the highway, and there was a bit of grit mixed into the air.

“Hmm, depending on the direction of the wind, we could end up with sawdust in our cooking.”

As I tried to think up some countermeasures, one of the guards standing beside the road and overseeing the logging came jogging over.

“So it’s already the upper sixth hour, is it? I wish you luck with your work again today.” This was a young guard I had grown acquainted with not long ago. Though he was a bit haughty, he also seemed to be good-natured.

“You too. I didn’t expect the work to clear more stall spaces would end up being so large scale.”

“Yes. We’ve had quite an increase in the number of stalls this past year, so we’re going to need to do several days of work to expand the available area before the revival festival,” the guard replied, shooting me a bit of a critical look. “And you’re still intent on expanding your business even further, aren’t you? That would leave us with even more of a space shortage.”

“Sorry about that.”

Our next day off would be four days from now, on the fifteenth, and the plan was for the Fa clan to also start operating an outdoor restaurant on the following day. However, it wouldn’t be separate from the Ruu clan’s restaurant, but rather a further expansion of it. Altogether, we would be borrowing an

additional five stalls' worth of space, which meant we would be filling up all the empty space currently being used to store felled lumber.

"The revival festival officially begins on the twenty-second of the violet month, but generally the number of stalls begins increasing five to six days in advance, so we need to finish this before then."

"I see. Sounds rough."

Still, if it was that big of a festival, then it was certain to have a tremendous economic impact. That was why the ruling class of Genos was sparing no personnel or effort in order to expand the stall spaces. Though the people of the forest's edge were granted an exemption from taxes, every other shop's success would help bring further profits to the town of Genos itself.

Now that I think about it, no matter how successful our businesses get, they'll never bring in any income for the nobles. The most they can do is deduct tax from the space and stall rental fees we pay to Milano Mas.

I felt sort of sorry when that occurred to me, but considering how the people of the forest's edge had suffered in poverty up till now, I was sure Duke Genos had no desire to start taxing them anytime soon. And everything that had happened with Cyclaeus would make it even harder to do so.

Still, eventually that would all just be water under the bridge, and then we might end up paying taxes too. Until that happened, though, hopefully we'd be able to have as many people as possible enjoy the novelty of giba cooking and help make the post town a livelier place.

"Whoa, what's going on?! The tables and chairs are all coated in dust!" Lala Ruu lamented, already starting to clean up the outdoor restaurant.

The guard glanced over that way and gave a "Hmm..." as he stroked his chin. "The sawdust is indeed blowing in this direction. It's only natural when we're trying to cut the trees down so quickly. I suppose there's no helping it... We'll set up a curtain here between us."

"Thank you. That really would be a huge help."

"Hmph. I just don't want you lodging a complaint later." The guard then called for his nearest member of his unit and gave orders to set up a curtain beside

the shop to block the sawdust. I started to turn to get to work on my preparations, only for him to call out, “Hold on. I’ve said this before, but don’t go causing a commotion with the workers, understood? If you get in a fight with them, we’re going to have a problem.”

“Understood. But we get quite a few rowdy customers at our stalls already, so I don’t think it’ll be an issue.”

“Ah, that’s not quite it. Normally, we *would* just hire your average ruffians in need of coin, but things are a little different this time around. They’re back in there a little ways so you can’t see them right now, but for today we have slaves from the Turan lands handling the work.”

After freezing in place for a moment, aghast, I turned toward the guard. The slaves from the Turan lands were citizens of Mahyudra. Northerners, who were hated enemies of the west.

As he furrowed his brow in disgust, the guard continued. “The fuwano harvests in the Turan lands have just wrapped up, so the slaves were no longer busy. It’s certainly cheaper than spending coins to higher laborers, isn’t it? However, most of our people aren’t used to the sight of citizens of Mahyudra, other than the residents of the Turan lands. The head of the guards has been at wits’ end trying to figure out how to not cause a disturbance.”

“So there are folks from Mahyudra working right over there?”

I didn’t know any northerners aside from Chiffon Chel, who worked at the Turan manor. There was Kamyua Yoshu, but he had mixed blood from Mahyudra and Selva.

Though Genos was a part of the domain of Selva, it was located quite far south, so there normally wouldn’t be any chance of encountering citizens of Mahyudra here. But in order to amass more wealth, Cyclaeus had gone out of his way to purchase slaves from distant parts of the country and put them to work.

“Now that I think about it, you’re a visitor from overseas, aren’t you, Asuta?” the guard asked, concern coming through in his voice. “Legend has it that visitors from overseas and the northerners share blood. It may be embarrassing for you to see them working as slaves; however...”

“Ah, it’s true that I wasn’t born on this continent, but I’m not one of what you call the people of the dragon god either. It’s just, slaves didn’t exist back in my home country, so...”

“Yes, it’s quite the same for the people of Genos. And not just us. No other towns nearby keep northerners as slaves,” the guard solemnly stated. “Since we’re so far removed from Mahyudra, we’re in no danger of getting mixed up in the ravages of war, so people tend not to carry the kind of anger and hatred toward northerners that you’d see elsewhere. That’s how the people of the forest’s edge ended up even more feared and scorned here than the citizens of the north.”

“Yeah, I’ve definitely noticed that.”

“Even so, you mustn’t show the northerners pity. All along the far-off border, war continues even now between Selva and Mahyudra. I can’t understand why someone would want to show them mercy when there are westerners being used as slaves in the northern kingdom as well.”

Somehow, it sounded as if he was trying to convince himself.

When he noticed my gaze, the guard’s brow furrowed. “I was born in the Turan lands. From a young age, my father raised me to believe that to show mercy to northerners was to turn your back on the western god.”

Genos had a two-hundred-year history, but Cyclaeus had only wielded his influence as Count Turan for around twenty years. Up until then, the people of Mahyudra had really only been spoken of in legend and folklore, but suddenly they had been brought here to Genos. That had surely caused quite a bit of concern.

Kamyua Yoshu had also said that in modern times there were fewer people out there who treated slaves as tools to be used up and that some land owners would even pay productive slaves or allow them to marry.

However, Cyclaeus had been a man belonging to a previous age, who *did* treat slaves as mere tools. The man didn’t even recognize northerners as fellow humans and was hostile toward Kamyua Yoshu as a result, so that certainly made sense.

Maybe it even disturbed the people of the Turan lands to see those northerners, whom they bore no grudge against, be treated as slaves. That would be exactly why they needed to be told not to show them pity.

“At any rate, keep away from them. They won’t even be able to talk properly to you anyway, so it’s not like anything would come of going near them,” the guard stated before turning around to leave. “Well, I’ll be moving along now. The curtain for your partition seems to have been delivered, so you can go ahead and prepare to open for business. If you run into any further inconveniences, please let us know right away.”

“Understood. But, um, could I ask just one thing?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“If you don’t mind, could you tell me your name?”

The young guard turned around with a dubious look and answered, “I’m Marth, the second platoon commander of the fifth guard unit assigned to the Saturas territory. Now, farewell...”

With that, the guard named Marth returned to the highway, and I set about getting the stalls ready for business.

“I see, so there are people from Mahyudra working over that way?” Ama Min Rutim asked while grilling some meat for myamuu giba, having arrived when the sun hit its peak. “Back when you were kidnapped, I visited the Turan lands with Ai Fa. I got a brief glimpse of them working the fields.”

“Ah right, and you talked to Myme back then, yeah? Well, Ai Fa hasn’t mentioned any of that to me.”

“I see. Perhaps that’s due to her not wanting to remember the time that you were held captive unless absolutely necessary,” Ama Min Rutim said with a smile.

At that, I scratched my head.

I couldn’t help but recall the exchange I’d had with Saris Ran Fou. Thinking back on it, both she and Ama Min Rutim were the same age as me, but they

seemed like such incredibly mature, good-natured people.

“Still, why exactly must slaves exist?” she wondered aloud.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“It’s just a thought I had when I went to the Turan lands with Ai Fa. Everyone living there seemed quite down. Apparently, that was due to the fact that they had lost their jobs because there are slaves to do the work...” As she moved the grilled meat to the edge of the pan, she quietly continued. “It seems the young folks all work elsewhere, so we only saw old people and children in the Turan lands. Slaves who don’t need to be paid may be a precious treasure for the nobles who use them, but they don’t seem to benefit the townsfolk at all.”

“Yeah, Polarth said something like that too. In the Turan lands, at the very least, the presence of slaves is only beneficial to the ruling class, while the citizens are forced to live difficult lives.”

In the post town ruled by the house of Saturas and the farms governed by the house of Daleim, the prosperity of those living there and those ruling over the land were directly tied to each other. The system was such that if the citizens profited, so did the nobles collecting taxes from them.

But in the Turan lands, the greatest source of income came from the fuwano and mamaria fields governed solely by the ruling house, and none of those profits made it to the citizens. That was why most people living there had moved elsewhere, leaving it with the lowest population of any county in Genos.

“Of course, now that fuwano sales have fallen drastically and the business deals Cyclaeus made need to be dealt with, the finances of the house of Turan are on the decline. Torst has had a lot of hardship to face as the guardian in charge of the house.”

The more I talked, the more I felt how deep the scars that Cyclaeus had left behind were. But the man had already been judged as a criminal, and those of us left behind had to fix those wounds bit by bit.

Not using slaves would help the Turan lands return to their proper state too...but the house of Turan can't hire more people with the current state of its finances, and I have no clue what would happen to those folks from Mahyudra if

there was no longer a purpose for them to be here...

Thanks to the curtain being raised, we could no longer see the logging work from our location. But I spotted folks here and there on the road trying to peek in that direction out of curiosity or otherwise shrinking in fear and leaving. Even if it didn't impact us directly, it wasn't exactly something I was all that happy to see.

"Asuta, this is the last one in this basket. Shouldn't we get the next batch ready?" Yamiru Lea asked in a firm tone as she worked the giba manju stall next to me. "I don't know why you're in such a fog, but if you aren't feeling well, shall I carry them over?"

"Ah, no, I'll go. Just hold on for a moment."

Getting myself mentally back in order, I headed around to the rear of the wagon.

Business was going great again today, and though there was still some time left until the start of the revival festival, there seemed to be a few more passersby than usual lately.

I'll have to lock down the menu soon. Guess I should make the final plans with Reina Ruu and the others after work, I thought to myself as I rummaged around the wagon, when Gilulu uncharacteristically let out a cry.

"What's the matter? Did you see something weird or..." I started to ask only for my words to catch in my throat as I froze in place.

Farther back behind the wagon stood a thicket, where I saw a massive figure lurking in the darkness.

"Not, panic... I, not, danger," a solemn voice said, clumsily speaking the western tongue.

He was a citizen of Mahyudra. His disheveled hair was blonde and his eyes a light purple. His skin was burnt slightly red, and he wore crude cloth attire over his huge frame. The man was every bit as big as Donda Ruu, with some serious musculature on his arms and legs.

His square face featured sunken eyes and a large aquiline nose. An unkempt

beard stretched from his cheeks down to his chin, making his appearance seem more rugged than even that of someone from Jagar.

Furthermore, there was a leather loop around the man's neck, and his legs were bound with metal manacles. The connecting chain was around thirty centimeters long, so it was made to ensure that it would be possible to walk but not run. Even at the settlement at the forest's edge, it was customary to bind prisoners in a similar way with leather straps.

"Wh-What is it? Aren't you one of the folks from Mahyudra working over there?" I asked with a gulp.

The man nodded back like he didn't fully comprehend. "Heard, guard, talk. You, Asuta of the Fa clan?"

"Y-Yes. That's right, I'm Asuta of the Fa clan..."

"You, Count Turan, manor, went?"

It was a much cruder manner of speech than that of the easterners I knew. There was quite a mismatch between his awkward speech and how threatening his voice sounded, which left me unable to rein in my total confusion.

"You, Count Turan, manor, went?" the man expressionlessly repeated.

Despite not understanding what was going on at all, I replied, "Yes. I've been to Count Turan's manor several times by now. But why exactly does that matter?"

Instantly, there was an intense shine in the man's eyes. With a clanking sound from his chain, he took a step closer to me.

"Chiffon Chel, alive?"

"Huh?"

"Chiffon Chel, my, sister... I, Eleo Chel. Chiffon Chel, alive?"

Once again, I was dumbstruck.

Chiffon Chel was a maid at the Turan manor, and she had told me she had an older brother. As she had explained to me once, since she had picked up the western tongue quickly, she had been sent to the castle town and ordered to

serve in her current role, while her brother was supposedly still being forced into harsh labor in the Turan lands.

“Ch-Chiffon Chel should still be working at the Turan manor. Ah, but the manor has a different lord now.”

The man from Mahyudra, Eleo Chel, shook his head as if to say he didn’t quite understand me. “Chiffon Chel, suffering?”

“She...” I started to speak, then hesitated.

I had last met her at the welcome banquet for the envoys from Banarm. It had only been a month since then, but never in any of the times when I’d been invited back to the Turan manor had I been given a chance to talk with her privately.

From what I knew, she had been assigned as Lefreya’s personal maid, and she was currently moving to a new residence alongside her masters. The only members of the old staff who were kept on under Lefreya should have been her and Sanjura.

Lefreya had become the head of the house on paper, while Sanjura simply wished for things to be nice and peaceful for her. I had no way of knowing what Chiffon Chel’s life was like with the two of them.

However...

“I can’t say for certain whether or not she’s suffering... But every time I’ve met her, she’s always been smiling.”

“Chiffon Chel, smiled?”

“Yes. She’s a very strong person, I’d say.”

Eleo Chel’s gaze fell downward to glare at his own feet. “Learn, words of west, can work, at Turan, manor. Chiffon Chel, chosen. I, not chosen.”

“Right...”

“Chiffon Chel, separated, difficult. But, happy, she smiled,” Eleo Chel said, lifting his face once more. The look in his purple eyes had shifted completely from before, now appearing perfectly calm. “Asuta of the Fa clan, grateful. Thank you, talking...”

“No...” I started to reply, only for there to be a rustling from the thicket behind him.

It was none other than the guard Marth, who soon appeared from within. “So this is where you were! Even if you’re on break, you can’t go leaving the area as you please!” Marth reprimanded him, his hand on the hilt of his sword as he hurriedly stepped between me and Eleo Chel. “And you were under strict orders not to approach anyone from town! Depending on the circumstances, you could be judged guilty of trying to escape, so...”

“H-Hold on, Marth! He just came here to talk!”

“To talk? There shouldn’t be any reason for you and a citizen of the north to have a discussion!”

“No, he...” I started to say, hesitating but then making up my mind to tell the truth. “He has a family member working as a maid under the current head of the house of Turan. And apparently, he somehow learned that I had been to the Turan manor, so he just wanted to ask about her well-being.”

“That’s...” Marth hesitated.

Meanwhile, Eleo Chel just stared back at him, unmoved.

“Even so, that doesn’t change the fact that he violated an order not to approach any townspeople. If it had been anyone but you, this surely would have ended in a massive problem.”

“So is he going to be punished in some way?”

With a sour look on his face, Marth shook his head and took his hand from his blade. “If he *had* caused a commotion, he would have been whipped for it. And by the way, you shouldn’t go thoughtlessly approaching northerners either.”

“Still, his sister really helped me out. When I tried to escape from the Turan manor, she did whatever she could for me, even though that also put her at risk of getting whipped.”

The expression on Marth’s face grew all the more sour. He strove to be a proud member of the militia, so the misconduct of the house of Turan had proved to be a really sore spot for him.

I had been kidnapped by Lefreya on the same day that he had declared to us how just and fair the elites of Genos were. Then just a few days later, Ciluel—the militia leader himself—had been proven guilty of serious crimes.

“I understand, so just hurry up and get back to work already. I’m sure nothing good will come of someone with ties to the nobility like you getting close to a slave.”

“Ah, but...”

“You certainly are stubborn. I already said I understand. At any rate, it’s forbidden for slaves to talk to townspeople. But, well, this man here is one of the few who have any command of the western tongue at all,” Marth said, sounding blatantly displeased. “If you intend to live here in Genos, you need to follow its laws diligently. It won’t end well if you try to get close to slaves.”

It really caught my attention that his tone sounded like he was actually telling himself. However, I didn’t want to trouble Marth any further.

“Got it. Sorry for all the trouble. And Eleo Chel, take care.”

At that, the northerner calmly nodded back at me, and then Marth led him away back into the thicket and out of view.

I don’t know the first thing about how slavery works in this world, so I guess it’s true that this is not something I should be carelessly sticking my nose into. In which case, it meant I would just have to discuss the matter thoroughly with someone well versed in the ways of this world.

Polarth had spoken to Chiffon Chel politely and showed no signs of looking down on her. The next time we met, I’d have to consult with him.

This isn’t anything too serious. I just want to let Chiffon Chel know that the brother she was separated from is still alive and that he’s worrying about her.

With that, I picked up the wooden box from the wagon and returned to the stall. The sun was now past its peak, and business was booming.

It would be several months before I would see Eleo Chel again, when these citizens of Mahyudra would be invited to the settlement at the forest’s edge in an unexpected turn of events. However, that was another story entirely.

Chapter 3: The Ruu Festival of the Hunt, Once Again

1

The Ruu clan's festival of the hunt ended up being held on the fourteenth of the violet month. Incredibly, they had gone out of their way to align it with our day off from our business in the post town. Since the festival of the hunt was a big event that we'd be spending most of the day on, it would be impossible for us to prepare for business the next day. That was why they'd scheduled it when they had, on the day before our business would be on break. It must've been Donda Ruu who made the decision. I was always impressed by how flexible he ended up being.

With that said, the fourteenth itself was a work day. Once we finished with business, we set about putting things in order afterward as usual, with Lala Ruu spurring us onward the whole time.

"Come on, hurry up! The festival of the hunt's already starting! We've got to get back to the settlement already!"

I could recall her acting similarly before the last festival of the hunt too. She undoubtedly wanted to see Shin Ruu competing in the contest of strength held between hunters.

Feeling secretly amused, I replied, "It'll be fine. We closed up earlier today than last time, and we still got to see most of the contest of strength back then, right?"

On top of that, last time we were traveling on foot, but now it would be by wagon. I figured when it was all added up, we would make it back to the settlement an hour and a half or so earlier.

Currently, it was the lower second hour, or what I estimated to be about two hours and twenty minutes after noon, and when taking into account the cleanup, coin exchanging, and ingredient purchasing we needed to do, we would make it back to the Ruu settlement by around three.

The Fa clan was finally set to open our outdoor restaurant in two days, but we intended to pick up the chairs and tables we had ordered tomorrow, on our day off. The expansion of the stall spaces had wrapped up this morning, so there was now a wide-open area off to our right.

“Once we get back to the settlement, we’ll have to start working on the banquet, correct? What an exhausting schedule.” After we were done with the cleanup, we started heading back, only for Yamiru Lea to begin grumbling.

“But there are six clans under the Ruu and they have over a hundred people in total, right?” Yun Sudra chimed in. “And they’re the most prosperous of all the clans, so I’m sure the banquet is going to be absolutely incredible.” Though they both worked the stalls together, it was rare for those two to make small talk.

“I couldn’t say. Since I remained at the Lea settlement the last time, I have no way of knowing. But it is simply a custom to have a bigger festival of the hunt where all blood relatives gather once a year, and today is just that day once again.”

“I see. The Sudra clan has few members, so I can’t even imagine such a huge banquet,” Yun Sudra excitedly replied, and then she clapped her hands together and said, “Ah, now that I think about it, both you and Toor Deen used to be part of the Suun clan, so big events like this probably aren’t anything unusual for you.”

As I manipulated Gilulu’s reins, I found my shoulder tensing a bit. I hadn’t expected Yun Sudra to bring up their past. However, the path back from the post town to the forest’s edge was narrow and on a bit of a slope, so I didn’t exactly have the leeway to turn around and look.

After a bit of silence, Yamiru Lea replied in the same tone as before, “Many of the Suun’s subordinate clans were so distant that it was rare for everyone to gather. From what I can recall, the leading clan head Zuuro Suun’s wedding was the last time it occurred.”

“Ah, I see. Wait, huh...? Zuuro Suun was your father, right, Yamiru Lea? So shouldn’t that have been before you were born?”

“No. The souls of the women Zuuro Suun married all returned to the forest

soon after childbirth. The one I remember was his fifth wedding, which I suppose would be thirteen years ago at this point.” In other words, when he married Tsuvai’s mother, Oura. Yamiru Lea was over twenty, so it wasn’t strange for her to remember the event. “That’s the only proper celebratory banquet I can remember. After all, this was after the hunters had essentially stopped working and began pillaging the fruits of the forest instead, which made it necessary to not have the subordinate clans gather in our settlement unless it couldn’t be avoided. Since hunting giba just so we could have a banquet was seen as too much of a dangerous hassle, the customs were changed so that each clan held their own festival of the hunt. And the Suun clan wasn’t really hunting giba anyway, so they didn’t give a damn about festivals.”

The conversation was definitely taking a disquieting turn.

However, Yamiru Lea’s tone then became just a touch more stern as she added, “You don’t need to get so gloomy over every little thing, Toor Deen. The fact that Yun Sudra is able to talk so freely about the Suun is proof that she isn’t concerned about our crimes. Right? Or would you prefer to have her avoid mentioning it at all for our sake?”

“Ah, no, I...”

“Huh?! Did I hurt your feelings somehow? Don’t cry, Toor Deen!” Yun Sudra said in a fluster.

And then, Yamiru Lea continued on. “But when we welcomed a bride or groom from a subordinate clan, we needed to hold a banquet at the Suun settlement, and each time it caused the members of the branch houses to suffer. They had to hunt giba despite being unaccustomed to the work, and prepare the meat, aria, and poitan. And then they had to pretend to enjoy the banquet while fearing their secret might get out. Perhaps Toor Deen was reminded of those difficult times.”

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t think about that...” Yun Sudra said.

“It’s fine. The Suun clan was in the wrong, so there’s no reason for you to watch your words,” Yamiru Lea stated in her chilly voice. “And as a member of the branch houses, Toor Deen, you had no way to oppose the main house, so there’s no need for you to fret over every little thing. You shouldn’t be so weak-

willed.”

I could hear Toor Deen snifle.

I figured I should interject, but before I could, the young girl spoke up herself.

“I’m sorry... But a little while ago I was invited to a banquet at the northern settlement, since I’m part of the Deen clan. It was as a chef, so I didn’t have enough free time to properly enjoy it, but it still made me really happy.”

“Oh, I see,” Yamiru Lea responded.

“Yeah... So I hope you’ll enjoy the Ruu banquet today as a member of the Lea clan.” From her voice, I could easily picture the bashful smile Toor Deen must have been wearing.

Just what sort of look did Yamiru Lea have in her eyes as she stared back, though?

“Yeah! I hope you’ll both get to be happy, now that you’re part of the Lea and Deen clans!” Yun Sudra said, undoubtedly breathing a sigh of relief. However, it was possible she and I might not have had any reason to worry regardless.

Though Yamiru Lea and Toor Deen hadn’t been able to forge a proper bond back when they belonged to the same clan, once their blood ties were severed, they were finally able to reach a point where they could be open with one another. Though listening to them made us nervous, it was probably important for them to be able to talk about these things.

With a feeling of calm restored in our wagon, we arrived at the Ruu settlement. Yamiru Lea and I got out, and I entrusted Gilulu’s reins to Toor Deen.

“Sorry about this, but I’m going to have to leave the wagon to you now. Ai Fa should be back at the house.”

“Right. Thank you again for everything today.”

Yun Sudra also peeked her head out beside Toor Deen, smiling brightly. Though Ai Fa and I had been invited to the Ruu festival of the hunt again, they would be heading back home. The plan was that Ai Fa would walk here after squaring the wagon away.

Lately, Toor Deen and the others had been able to attend most of these events, so I couldn't help but feel a bit lonely and like something was out of sorts. However, it went against the customs of the forest's edge to have members of other clans attend a festival of the hunt without a proper reason.

"We'll be picking up the chairs and tables tomorrow when the sun is at its peak, right? We'll see you then. Farewell..." Yun Sudra said.

"Ah, hold on a moment!" I stopped them before they could go. "I only just thought of this, but the next time we have a break period, why don't we try holding a festival of the hunt like the Ruu clan does?"

"Huh? But we're supposed to have one when all of the clans are entering into a break period..."

"Yeah. But last time, the hunters from the nearby clans all entered a break period at the same time, didn't they? So wouldn't it be fine for us to celebrate together as well?"

At that, Toor Deen and Yun Sudra both leaned further out from the wagon.

"Y-You're saying we should hold a banquet together? With the Fa clan?"

"Yup. I believe the Fa, Deen, Sudra, Fou, and Ran all went on break at the same time before. And the Liddo are supposed to be close to the Deen, so why not get those six clans together and celebrate?"

Among that list, the Fou had blood ties with the Ran, and the Deen had ties with the Liddo, while the Fa and Sudra lacked any such relations. But we saw each other pretty much every day for prep work and cooking lessons, and we now had a shared smoking house. When we were that close already, it made sense to me that we could celebrate the hunt together.

"Of course, the Deen and Liddo fall under the Zaza, so Gulaf Zaza would need to give his permission, and I don't know if any of the clan heads will agree to begin with...even including Ai Fa."

"Ah, no, I'm sure our clan head, Raielfam, will approve! In fact, I'm sure the Gaaz and Ratsu will be disappointed that their break periods don't line up too!"

"And the Deen clan head will definitely agree as well. I don't think the head of

the Zaza will be an issue either.”

Toor Deen and Yun Sudra both looked completely overjoyed as they offered those responses.

“I see. In that case, I’ll try discussing the matter with the others. I’m starting to feel like my own clan head may end up being the most hesitant in the end...”

“Then please do whatever you can to convince her, Asuta!” Yun Sudra said with an adorable smile. She had seemed even stronger and more cheerful ever since our conversation at the Sauti settlement. “It should be around a month till our next break period, right? That feels so far off now! Thank you for coming up with such a wonderful idea!”

“Ah, it’s nothing.”

With that, the two of them departed in high spirits.

As she watched the wagon disappear into the distance, Yamiru Lea shrugged her shoulders.

“Today is a banquet, and here you are already talking about the next one. Are they truly that much fun?”

“They are. I’m sure you’ll feel the same by the end of the day, Yamiru Lea.”

Now that I thought about it, Yamiru Lea hadn’t been at Dan Rutim’s birthday banquet, so she had only attended the dinners we held when Zuuro Suun and his former family were invited to the Ruu settlement, and at the Sauti settlement when things were settled with the lord of the forest.

Though we did prepare some elaborate dishes for those, they didn’t really compare to a real banquet. This would be her first chance to truly experience how fun these events could really be.

“Well, let’s head on in. Lala Ruu must be getting anxious over in the other wagon.”

Yamiru Lea and I walked into the Ruu settlement. Instantly, an air of enthusiasm rushed over us. Just as Yamiru Lea had said before, this time all of their blood relatives had gathered in the settlement for a huge once-a-year festival of the hunt. That meant over a hundred people, and this was my first

time seeing all of them gathered there in the plaza in the middle of the day.

Under the brilliant afternoon sunlight, a huge crowd was cheering. At the center of it was the contest of strength between the hunters.

“Ack, it really did start already! Who’s up against whom?”

The people from the Ruu clan’s wagon were talking as well as they got down. Their group included Lala and Reina Ruu, Ama Min Rutim, and Tsuvai. It must have been a real struggle even just getting the vehicle back to the main house with this crowd.

“That seems to be the Ririn clan head and the eldest son of the Maam. What should we do, Reina Ruu?”

“I’ll go look for Sheera Ruu and figure out how preparations are going, so please wait near the main house.”

The women had apparently arranged to take turns manning the stove in order to enjoy watching the contest of strength in between.

This time around, rather than cooking for the winner, I had been asked to prepare a single dish for everyone to enjoy. Meanwhile, Barthia and the women of the main Ruu house were taking care of the preparations for the dishes which took the most time.

At any rate, after Reina Ruu disappeared into the crowd, the remaining six of us slowly moved along the outskirts of the plaza with the wagon. Preparations seemed to already be underway at the stoves throughout the area. In fact, in addition to the enthusiastic cheers filling the air, there was also an aroma wafting about that seriously stimulated the appetite.

“Ah, you’re back. You sure are early,” Ludo Ruu called out when we were about halfway around the plaza. He was lightly dressed, with no cloak or blade, and beside him stood the young Lea clan head Rau Lea.

“Oh, so have the two of you not participated in the contest of strength yet?”

“Hmm? I’ve already won three matches. It was two for you, right, Rau Lea?”

“Huh?! You’ve already won three when it’s still this bright out?” Lala Ruu questioned, clearly shocked.

In the Ruu clan contest of strength, you first had to win three times in order to make it past the preliminary round. If you lost twice you were eliminated, and once eight people were selected, that put an end to the initial stage. Once those final eight slots were filled, a tournament to determine the overall victor began.

“Yeah, well, Rau Lea and I made it into the final eight last time. And once that happens, you get challengers coming your way one after another.”

“Right. Especially since Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim aren’t participating this time. Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim hit three wins real quickly too.”

Though they had competed in the finals of the previous contest, neither Donda Ruu nor Dan Rutim were taking part today due to their injuries. And Ai Fa was similarly injured too, meaning three of the eight finalists from last time were missing. Darmu Ruu had suffered injuries to the palm of his right hand and was also absent, but Rau Lea was apparently participating despite having several stitches in his head.

“Umm... So, what about Shin Ruu?” Lala Ruu asked.

“Shin Ruu’s only gone up against me so far. Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen him for a while.”

“Huh?! Shin Ruu challenged you again, Ludo?!”

“Yep. He challenges me every time.”

“But he hasn’t beaten you even once! If he didn’t try to fight you all the time, he might be able to make it into the final eight,” Lala Ruu complained, puffing up her cheeks.

“Yeah. Shin Ruu has gotten so much stronger I hardly recognized him. He might even still win three times in a row,” Ludo Ruu said nonchalantly, then got a sparkle in his eye. “But I couldn’t back down this time around. I can’t lose to anybody until I beat *him*.”

“Who do you mean? Mida?”

“Nah, Mida topples over, same as anyone else. No, I’m talking about *him*,” Ludo Ruu said, his gaze fixed on the center of the plaza. Two new hunters were

stepping forward from behind the judge, Raa Rutim.

“Huh? That’s Jeeda, isn’t it? Didn’t he say he wouldn’t participate in any contests of strength?”

“Yeah, but I pushed him into it. I need to settle things with him.”

Apparently, Ludo Ruu felt a strong sense of rivalry with Jeeda, who was both younger and smaller than he was. As for the reason, it was apparently because back at the Sauti settlement, it had been Jeeda’s arrow that had taken out the lord of the forest’s right eye.

Considering he prided himself on his skills with a bow, that had apparently stirred up Ludo Ruu’s competitive spirit quite a bit. But of course, he wasn’t the sort to let those feelings take a negative turn and simply wished to compete with Jeeda fair and square.

“That’s his third opponent. And obviously he hasn’t lost yet either, so this should put him in the final eight.”

“Hmm, he does seem pretty skilled, though I’d definitely beat him if we were to clash.” Rau Lea’s eyes had been blazing like those of a hunting dog this whole time. He was supposedly upset about his lack of contribution during the hunt to take down the lord of the forest. Though Dan Rutim had said the accomplishment belonged to all the hunters equally, these hot-blooded young men seemed to have all sorts of strong feelings about how things had played out. “So, Ludo Ruu. You, Jiza Ruu, and Gazraan Rutim have three wins, and Jeeda and Mida each have two, right? I want to hurry up and get my third win too.”

“Hmm? Can you not challenge someone yourself, Rau Lea?” I asked.

“No. When you make it into the final eight, the custom is that next time you wait to be challenged. I want to go up against someone with some real backbone, myself...” Rau Lea started to say, only for a figure to approach from the crowd.

“Ah, Shin Ruu!” Lala Ruu loudly exclaimed.

After giving her a nod, the young hunter stopped before the Lea clan head. “Rau Lea, could I ask you for a match?”

The blaze in Rau Lea's eyes instantly grew brighter, while Lala Ruu objected, "Hold on! You're going with Rau Lea right after Ludo?! Why are you only challenging such strong hunters?! Both of them were in the final eight last time!"

"That's exactly why. Apparently, another hunter challenged Mida, so Rau Lea is the only one available out of the final eight from last time." Shin Ruu looked as calm as always.



Staring back, Rau Lea replied, “Oh? So do you think I’ll be easy to handle or something? As we’ve practiced more and more, it’s ended up being an equal amount of wins and losses between us, Shin Ruu.”

Rau Lea had been an excellent hunter to begin with, but when Ai Fa had suggested he go up against Shin Ruu, he was swiftly defeated. With the way that Rau Lea rushed recklessly ahead, he had trouble handling the calm, composed, and nimble Shin Ruu.

However, there was no doubt that Rau Lea was a skilled enough hunter to enter the final eight. Even Shin Ruu needed to give everything he had in order to win. Both of them had been training diligently, and they would often polish their skills against one another... That was the background behind Rau Lea’s statement.

As he stared back at Rau Lea with a look of composure, Shin Ruu tilted his head a bit. “I know how strong you are better than anyone, Rau Lea. That’s exactly why I wanted to challenge you. After all, it’s our duty to face skilled hunters in the contest of strength.”

After hearing that reply, Rau Lea broke out in an even more intense grin. “That’s true. I’ve just been real on edge lately. But if I said something to sully your honor, then I apologize.”

“You have nothing to worry about. If you’ve accepted my challenge, then let’s go stand by.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

The two young hunters left. Lala Ruu clicked her tongue angrily. “Tch! I thought Shin Ruu would make it to the final eight this time. It really felt like a possibility with Papa Donda and Dan Rutim not taking part!”

“Don’t be dumb. Anybody thinking small-minded stuff like that would never make it into the top eight. A hunter’s got to take down strong enemies,” Ludo Ruu said.

As they were talking, Jeeda won his match. Just as Ludo Ruu had predicted, despite being a guest here, he had gotten three wins and been selected for the final eight. With the way he steadily advanced, I couldn’t help but be reminded

of Ai Fa last time around.

“Ah, Mida’s up next. Hmm, he’s up against...the Ririn clan head, looks like.”

“The Ririn clan head? Wait, didn’t he just face the eldest Maam son?”

“Yeah. He beat Ji Maam in a flash.”

From what I could recall, Ji Maam was the largest of all the hunters under the Ruu, Mida aside. At the last festival of the hunt, I saw his match with Ai Fa as soon as I arrived at the settlement, and it made me break out in a cold sweat.

“The Ririn arrived late, so he may be in a hurry to find people to face. Still, he must be a pretty good hunter to go up against Mida right after Ji Maam.”

Ludo Ruu’s words caught my attention, and I glanced over at the center of the plaza. I could spy Mida’s massive frame from a distance, and standing in front of him was a middle-aged man with no really remarkable features. He had a medium build, and there was a bit of gray in his hair.

“Hmm, I don’t really remember much about the Ririn clan head. I think last time he lost right away to my old man and Dan Rutim.”

“He’s gotta be strong if he’s been challenging those two out of everyone here,” I replied, to which Ludo Ruu furrowed his brow.

“Hmm? Hold on a moment... Now that I think about it, the Ririn clan head challenged my old man and Dan Rutim in the contest before that too. Was he doing that every time?”

“You think? But in the last ten years it’s always been either Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim who won, right?”

“Yeah. And for the last five or six years, they haven’t lost to anyone but each other.”

Then, if the Ririn clan head really had only faced those two each time and earned his two black marks, that would mean he was eliminated before facing anyone else.

“Still, I can’t imagine anyone doing something that—” Ludo Ruu started to say, only to be drowned out by cheers.

When I turned to look, I found Mida with his back on the ground, while the Ririn clan head's hand was held up in the air.

"The winner is Giran Ririn of the Ririn clan! Mida of the Ruu clan must withdraw!" the judge Raa Rutim's voice resounded clearly.

"Ooh," Ludo Ruu remarked, licking his lips like a tiger cub. "At any rate, the Ririn clan head's strength is the real deal. This is getting interesting."

It seemed that even without Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim, the contest of strength between the hunters hadn't lost any of its luster. Actually, without the two big favorites, it might have turned into a closer fight that would get folks even more fired up.

After that, Shin Ruu and Rau Lea had their bout, and after a seriously close match, Shin Ruu emerged victorious. He had defeated one of the previous top eight, and the crowd cheered in admiration.

"He did it! Now that he's beaten Rau Lea, maybe he'll be able to beat two more!" Lala Ruu was in complete spectator mode, so our timing for heading to the kitchen was thrown off.

As I was pondering what exactly I should do, Ama Min Rutim whispered to me, "Asuta, I'll head to the main house's kitchen on my own. It's possible that Reina Ruu is looking for us by now. And I'll ask whether the women helping out with your cooking need you."

"Ah, thank you."

With a truly refreshing smile, Ama Min Rutim disappeared into the crowd.

And then Lala Ruu shouted out yet again, "Huh?! Why is he challenging Ji Maam now?! Ugh, I want to go give him a smack on the head!"

Even though his last match had just concluded, Shin Ruu was now standing in wait alongside Ji Maam. If I remembered correctly, he had lost to that mountain of a man in the last contest of strength.

I just feel like if I'm not going to have another chance to cross blades with that man again, then I'm going to have to hone my skills to be much greater than they are now. Otherwise, I'll spend my whole life afraid of my own weakness.

Those words that Shin Ruu had spoken several days ago came to mind.

When Sanjura had gotten the better of him, he started trying harder than ever before to grow stronger.

If I were in Lala Ruu's position, I might have felt the same way. And yet...

If this were a cooking contest instead, I could've ended up taking the same sort of actions Shin Ruu was. No matter how much I tried to hold it back, I really hated to lose.

Shin Ruu and Giran Ririn... No, all of the Ruu hunters are showing some incredible spirit, facing this challenge.

After that, Shin Ruu defeated not only Ji Maam but also the second son of the main Rutim house.

Furthermore, Giran Ririn got his three wins without any losses, and Mida and Rau Lea were both able to grasp victory after tasting a single defeat, which set up the top eight.

2

"Hey there. We've been waiting for you, Asuta." Barthia greeted me with a smile as I headed toward the main house's kitchen and found her working outside, after we finished watching the preliminary matches for the contest of strength.

"Sorry, I ended up totally leaving everything up to all of you. There weren't any issues, were there?"

"No. It wasn't anything difficult. In fact, the toughest part was just not nodding off."

Jeeda's mother Barthia was once again wearing the attire of the women of the forest's edge. She wore men's clothing in the morning when hunting wild birds out in the forest, but I never caught a glimpse of her then, so I had gotten totally accustomed to seeing her dressed as she was now.

Beside her, today's special dish was giving off an incredibly pleasant aroma. What I had come up with for today was something I'd wanted to try for a while:

a whole roast giba.

When I heard that whole roast kimyuus were commonly sold at the sun god's revival festival, I made up my mind to give it a shot too.

Furthermore, though the revival festival was officially held from the twenty-second of the violet month to the third of the silver month—a thirteen day period—there were particularly significant days among them such as “the day of dawn,” “the day of the sun's peak,” “the day of the downfall,” and “the day of the return.” On those special days of celebration, Genos castle would distribute a large amount of free kimyuus and fruit wine, from what I was told, so I was in the middle of trying to figure out if we could bring whole giba roasts into the post town for the townsfolk too.

Though it was easy to say you wanted to roast something whole, the process wasn't quite so simple. It went without saying that if you just cooked it over an open flame like usual, the heat would burn the surface before the meat could fully cook. We had no choice but to roast that huge chunk of meat over a very long period of time.

“Well, doesn't it have a nice color to it? It already looks like it'd be extremely good,” Bartha remarked with a satisfied grin.

It was true that the roasted surface of the giba was already doing a lot to stir up my appetite.

I had chosen a young giba that was somewhere between seventy and eighty centimeters long for the dish. We just burned the fur off the pelt, and after removing the blood and organs, there was probably around forty kilos of meat. By the time it was completely cooked, it would probably have lost an additional ten kilos or so in terms of fat and moisture.

For seasoning, we just rubbed salt into the skin and stomach. Since it was a giba the Fou had caught two days ago, it had been pickling in pico leaves until this morning. That was more than enough for seasoning.

The giba was pierced through from throat to rear with a metal skewer, and was placed atop stone supports. Then it was rotated around and around so that it was roasted evenly.

We used the charcoal we got from Mikel for this part. He had instructed us that for cooking large chunks of meat, we should burn this particular charcoal all the way to the center.

Of course, this was my first time tackling a whole giba roast. Even back home, I had never tried to roast a whole pig. All I had to go on was theoretical knowledge gained through watching a television program on the process with great interest.

I had been nervous about going into this event unprepared, so I had practiced the roasting process on a giba hind leg. The seven or eight kilo leg had taken around two hours to cook. On the TV show I watched, a thirty kilo piglet had taken five or six hours to cook. Based on that, I asked Barthia to start the process an hour before the sun hit its peak. There were somewhere between sixty and seventy minutes in an hour here in this world, so I decided to roast the meat for eight to nine hours between the start time and sunset. That way, even using such a primitive cooking method, we could avoid it ending up rare.

Still, we can't spend that long on it in the post town. We could stay in town overnight and get to work early in the morning so that it's done by the time the sun hits its peak... But thirty to forty kilos of meat would go in no time, so it would probably be ideal to go with multiple giba that are even smaller, I thought to myself as my gaze shifted from Barthia to the other person present, who was a man rather than a chef. It was Shin Ruu's father Ryada Ruu, seated there on the ground and keeping an eye on how the charcoal was heating.

"Um, are you helping out Barthia, Ryada Ruu?"

"Yes. Even I can handle a task like this. The women are busy with the other dishes, and they'll also want to see the hunters in the contest of strength too." Ryada Ruu had retired as a hunter due to a serious leg injury. But I felt terribly sorry for having a man as healthy as he was—outside of the one leg—handle such a task. "Don't worry. It's not about how light or heavy a job may be. And there's not a lot for me to do today anyway, so I actually appreciate it."

"But aren't you interested in the contest of strength, Ryada Ruu? I'm sure you've already heard, but Shin Ruu was selected for the top eight."

"Yes, that's a first for him, and I'm terribly glad to hear it," Ryada Ruu nodded

with a face every bit as calm as his son's. "But I've already retired from hunting. The young women have the important task of selecting a husband before them, so they should be the ones keeping a close eye on the contest of strength instead."

"I've always thought that the two of you really are a lot alike. Not just in terms of appearance, but on the inside too."

Speaking of appearances, Ryada Ruu had long blackish-brown hair, a similarly colored mustache, and was in every way a rather somber and attractive middle-aged man. His almond-shaped eyes and narrow-bridged nose were just like Shin Ruu's, and his physique was slender and lithe.

"That's because we're father and son, tied together by blood. But Shin took strongly after Tari as well, so I'm sure he'll become an even better hunter than I was."

"Yeah, you've got some great kids, Ryada Ruu. Not just Shin and Sheera Ruu. Your younger kids are so adorable too, I can hardly stand it," Bartha chimed in with an amused grin while slowly rotating the skewer. Though their personalities were complete opposites, they had both been hunters themselves and had children who hunted now, plus they seemed to be around the same age. I'd be happy for them if they'd grown closer over the last few hours.

"Well, what about you, Bartha? Jeeda's in the top eight too," I asked.

"We aren't even people of the forest's edge. Jeeda wouldn't have participated if Ludo Ruu hadn't begged him so much, so he should have no regrets regardless of when he loses," Bartha answered, though she was probably kidding a bit. She was smiling again as she wiped the sweat from her brow. It went without saying, but it was intensely hot there next to the supports. And no matter how simple of a task it might have been, it was still important to keep an eye on the intensity of the flame and the state of the meat, so you couldn't just let your mind wander. "What about you, though, Asuta? Do you have no interest at all since Ai Fa isn't participating?"

"Pretty much. I'm a little interested in how it turns out, but it feels bad for my heart, watching hunters square off with one another." Ai Fa herself had arrived in the settlement around when the preliminaries wrapped up, but Rimee Ruu

had gotten ahold of her right away, so she was with Granny Jiba around now. “I’m gonna have to move on to the other preparations now. Sorry, but could I ask you to keep this up a bit longer?”

“It’s no skin off our backs. You could even head back out into the plaza. If we need anything, we’ll call for you.”

After giving the two of them my thanks, I headed to the kitchen.

Though I mentioned other preparations, it was ultimately just making the sauces for the whole roast giba. Nothing that would take all that much effort.

Meanwhile, there was a whole lot of commotion from the women on all sides. Apparently, Reina and Sheera Ruu in particular had determined that this would be a good opportunity to give cooking lessons to the members of the clans like the Ririn, Maam, and Muufa, who lived a little farther away, so they were running around giving detailed instructions.

Though she usually worked for me, Yamiru Lea was joining them for today, leaving me operating on my own for the first time in a while. Though I felt just a tiny bit alienated now that the Ruu could prepare delicious food all on their own, I felt even more happiness for them.

Now then, the contest of strength finals should be kicking off soon. The top eight are Jiza Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, Ludo and Shin Ruu, Rau Lea, Mida, Jeeda, and Giran Ririn... Just who exactly is going to end up winning? I thought to myself as I reached out toward the door to the kitchen.

But then, something suddenly hit me in the head.

Looking down, I saw a small nut from a tree at my feet. As I wondered whether a bird had dropped it or something, another came flying at my head.

The culprit seemed to be hiding in a tree about five or six meters away. As I tilted my head and approached, a voice whispered down, “Asuta.”

“Huh? Is that you, Lem Dom?”

“Of course it is. Could you come over here a bit?”

It was just the path to the washing place in that direction, so I did as she asked. Before long there was a turn in the path that meant we could no longer

be seen from out front, where Lem Dom swiftly descended to the ground.

“It’s pretty unusual for you to be around here at this time of day, Lem Dom. What about your training?”

“Today’s training is observing the contest of strength. I mean, what could be better than that? But could you lower your voice a bit more?” Lem Dom asked, bringing her face down closer to mine, as she was taller than me. She had a strange mixture of intensity and sex appeal about her, so I felt kind of on edge when she got too close. “Asuta, I have a request to make of you. Could you share some food with me later too?”

“Huh? Didn’t you say you’d get today’s portion tomorrow and rely on the Sudra for tonight?”

Lem Dom helped out with preparing food each morning. In exchange, she was given jerky to eat during the day and a dinner at the Fa house at night. But since I wouldn’t be returning to the Fa house tonight she said her plan was to help the Sudra with their work to earn a dinner there. And that sounded like it would work out just fine, as tomorrow was a day off from work with no help needed, so she could just get her food from the Fa clan then.

“That was the plan. But I couldn’t help being curious about things here, so I decided to skip going to the Sudra. And it was really worth it,” Lem Dom said with her eyes blazing bright, undoubtedly because she had observed the fighting spirit of the hunters. “I’ll help out the Sudra tomorrow instead for my meal, so I’d like to receive today’s payment now. What do you say?”

“Hmm. I think I can do that if I borrow ingredients from the Ruu clan... But in that case, wouldn’t it be better to just have you help with my work and attend officially as a guest? Then you could eat as much of the meal prepared for the Ruu as you please. They’re making plenty, so it shouldn’t be any issue to include you.”

“If I could do that, I wouldn’t be asking like this. Why exactly do you think I’m hiding?”



“Ah, I see. So you don’t want to run into anyone from the Zaza clan.”

The four Ruu and Rutim women who had gone to the northern settlement had returned home today. But the women from the north such as Sufira Zaza had remained here on Gulaf Zaza’s orders.

During the last festival of the hunt, Dari Sauti had attended the banquet as a guest and said, “You should have summoned Gulaf Zaza too.” The argument was that doing so would allow him to see in person just how much strength and wealth the Ruu had gained through the power of delicious food and their business in the post town.

Gulaf Zaza had undoubtedly gotten a glimpse of that when he was invited to the dinner with Zuuro Suun and the Suun family. I figured Sufira Zaza’s group might have been ordered to remain here in order to act as his eyes and verify things.

“Really, just how long do they plan to remain here in the Ruu settlement? Is it really taking them this long to learn how to be good chefs?” Lem Dom grumbled. She was related to those women, and they must have shared deep ties from their time living together in the northern settlement. But it seemed she didn’t want to see them, as whenever she went to learn how to hunt birds early in the morning from Barthia, she had been taking care to hide herself.

Since the exchange of women had occurred on the day that we’d headed to Daleim, over a month would have passed by this point. You didn’t have to be Lem Dom to question just why their stay had gone on for so long.

“Well, I guess it just goes to show how interested Gulaf Zaza is in delicious food. Sufira Zaza and the others were supposed to head back soon after the Ruu and Rutim women returned.”

“But they’re staying through tonight, right? That’s why I have no choice but to stay hidden,” Lem Dom complained, roughly rustling her hair. “So, what do you say? Will you prepare me food?”

“Hmm. In that case, I’ll quietly try to ask Donda Ruu if it’s all right to share some food from the banquet. And if he refuses, I’ll go ahead and make some myself.”

“Hmm, so you don’t want to waste the effort on me, then?”

“That’s not it. Everyone from the Ruu clan gave their all to prepare this meal, so I figured you’d want to try some.”

Lem Dom shot me a suspicious glare, but before long she shrugged her shoulders.

“Right, that’s just the kind of guy you are. In that case, I’ll go ahead and rely on your kindness.”

“Okay. Well then, where should I deliver the food? Since everyone is eating outside, how about borrowing Barthra and Jeeda’s house?”

“Sounds perfect. You know, if I were a proper woman, I might have ended up wanting you for a husband,” Lem Dom said in a very unserious tone, and then she reached for a tree branch. “I’ll be hiding out near Barthra’s house once the sun sets. It’ll be a hassle if anyone from the Zaza sees me, so don’t try to look for me, okay?”

“Got it. I’ll see you later.”

Even though Sufira Zaza and the others were around, Donda Ruu had given Barthra permission to teach Lem Dom how to be a hunter. I was sure he’d allow me to share food from the banquet with her too.

If he were the same man he was back when he didn’t care about Ai Fa, he probably wouldn’t have permitted Lem Dom to set foot in the Ruu settlement to begin with.

It would soon be seven months since I had come to the settlement at the forest’s edge. A whole lot had changed since then, and Donda Ruu in particular seemed to be a prime example of that.

He had rejected both the idea of female hunters and delicious food at first, but now he acknowledged Ai Fa’s skills and even permitted members of his clan to do business in the post town. If you had told me seven months ago how things would be now, I never would have believed you. It would just seem insane for a ferocious guy like that to allow all of this.

Thinking back on it, we really have come a long way... Ah, it’s too early to be

getting all sentimental, though. The forest's edge and Genos as a whole were still in the middle of that transition.

But at any rate, in order to carry out my own work, I first needed to locate Donda Ruu.



"Ah, Asuta, I finally get a chance to talk to you again," Gazraan Rutim called out as I was weaving my way through the crowd toward the edge of the plaza after talking with Donda Ruu. Even though this man had a fierce battle ahead of him, he still seemed every bit as calm and composed as always.

"Hey there. Aren't you going to be up soon, Gazraan Rutim?"

"No, my battle will be after the next one."

The tournament for the final eight was stretched out to allow plenty of rest time between each round. The first one between Mida and Rau Lea had just concluded.

"That was quite a close match just now. I feel bad for Rau Lea," I noted.

"Yes, Mida truly has grown stronger. He's gained enough strength to take on giba and is a proper hunter now."

"Who will you be facing, Gazraan Rutim?"

"I'll be up against Giran Ririn."

In that case, his first opponent was the man who had defeated Mida and Ji Maam. He was the one competitor that was an unknown for me, so he had a bit of an ominous aura about him.

"Giran Ririn is a famed hunter. Are you familiar with his clan, Asuta?"

"No, I've only heard the name."

Actually, I had only really interacted with the Ruu and Rutim, and aside from Rau and Yamiru Lea, I had no real contact with their other subordinate clans.

"I see. Well, the Ririn are the newest of the Ruu's subordinate clans, and five years ago they only had four members to their name."

"Only four of them? They didn't have any relatives either?"

“That’s right. Then they took a bride from the Lea and became Ruu subordinates, which Donda Ruu permitted solely because he acknowledged their clan head Giran Ririn’s great strength.”

A clan with just four members was permitted to take a bride rather than having their name stripped from them and being brought into an existing clan... That certainly felt like quite the wild tale.

“They’ve also taken in husbands from the Maam and Rutim, and three of their children have since survived past the age of five, so they currently have ten members. If they can hold out until those young children are grown, the Ririn will avoid destruction. That is why Giran Ririn is a hunter I greatly respect.”

“That’s amazing. It really, seriously is.”

Here in the settlement at the forest’s edge, a clan that lost its strength would soon collapse and be absorbed by a parent clan. Four clans had died out in the last year that way. The Fou only had the Ran under them, and the Fa and Sudra stood on their own, which was the result of dwindling away after consolidating as much as they could.

It was difficult for the Sudra to manage even with nine clan members, so it must have been beyond extraordinary for the clan second only to the Suun in power to acknowledge the strength of the Ririn with only four members and welcome them into the fold.

“As a hunter, it’s an honor to have the chance to compete against Giran Ririn. I’m grateful for the forest’s guidance.”

“Right. Give it your all, Gazraan Rutim. I’ll be cheering you on.”

“Of course. It is no shame to lose in a contest of strength, but I still want to do everything I can to win, as the clan head of the Rutim.” Though Gazraan Rutim appeared just as calm as always, he seemed to be getting worked up under the surface. “By the way, where exactly are you heading, Asuta?”

“Ah, I had a little something to discuss with Donda Ruu, and now I’m heading back to the kitchen.”

“I see. It feels unusual somehow, seeing you acting on your own.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way.”

After sharing a smile with Gazraan Rutim, I went ahead and got back to my work. After finishing the sauces, that just meant watching over the whole roast giba with Bartha and Ryada Ruu. There was nothing to do but to maintain a strong flame at a level where it wouldn't burn the meat.

After a while, Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu delivered the news that Gazraan Rutim had beaten Giran Ririn. Apparently, they had watched the contest of strength while Granny Jiba was taking a nap.

“Gazraan Rutim has grown even stronger than before. The Ririn clan head was also a hunter worthy of praise, but... No, let me simply say they both fought wonderfully,” Ai Fa stated, an even more intense light than usual shining in her eyes. Though she had to be half dragged into participating last time around, she looked as if she was lamenting the fact that she was too injured to do so now.

At the same time, I was also told how Ludo Ruu had swiftly beaten Jeeda, while Shin Ruu narrowly lost to Jiza Ruu.

“Shin Ruu had an unfortunate matchup. Though he isn't on the level of Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim, Jiza Ruu is an outstanding hunter.”

“So in short, the ones who moved on to the semi-finals were Jiza Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, Ludo Ruu, and Mida, huh?”

Aside from Mida, that was an entirely different lineup than last time. But on the other hand, they were all in the top eight the last time too. Thanks to Donda Ruu, Dan Rutim, and Ai Fa's absence, Shin Ruu, Jeeda, and Giran Ririn had managed to earn enough wins to get in, but they were ultimately defeated, leaving behind those four. For the people who were moving on to have achieved such consistent results, it meant they must have won because of skill rather than luck or coincidence.

And supposedly Sanjura's on Ludo Ruu's level, while Kamyua is even more skilled than that. Those two must really be monsters to be that strong despite coming from town.

At any rate, the sun had sunk a good bit to the west.

The conclusion of the contest of strength and the start of the banquet were

now fast approaching.

3

Granny Jiba was standing in front of the brightly burning ritual flame, with Mia Lea and Vina Ruu attending to her. With fingers like withered branches, she was holding a celebratory grass crown purified by herbs and smoke. As over a hundred people watched on, she placed it atop Jiza Ruu's head.

Jiza Ruu had defeated Mida, and Gazraan Rutim won against Ludo Ruu. Then, in this contest of strength where the finalists' fathers had not been able to compete, the two sons clashed in their place, and Jiza Ruu emerged victorious.

"I grant this blessing to Jiza Ruu, eldest son of the Ruu clan, who overcame a great many hunters and showed the forest the might of his soul."

As the crown was placed upon his head, a hundred cheers erupted, shaking the very heavens. Jiza Ruu's expression remained as calm as always as he stood, having accepted the blessing. He climbed to the top of the stand constructed behind him, and Granny Jiba slowly withdrew.

Donda Ruu stepped forward to take their place in front of the ritual flame with his left arm in a sling. "Now, let the banquet begin! Relatives of the Ruu, give your thanks to the forest for the blessings it has granted us, and take them into yourselves to forge your flesh and blood!"

Once again, the crowd cheered.

The air in the plaza was filled with an incredible sense of vitality, in a scene illuminated by numerous bonfires. All throughout the crowd, people were holding up bottles of fruit wine while giving their thanks to the forest.

The banquet had begun.

"Okay, guess it's time to get to cutting the meat."

The whole roast giba that had just been over the flame had been transferred onto a board coated in suurub leaves.

Since there weren't any tables, large cloths were spread out across the ground. I got down on my knees before the still steaming hunk of meat, then

picked up a metal skewer and my carving knife.

Food was being prepared here and there throughout the plaza, and there were other cloths spread out for people to relax on. There was a mountain of wooden plates stacked beside the food so that everyone could just grab whatever they pleased. In other words, it was a buffet-style meal.

A ton of folks came rushing over my way right at the start of the banquet. There was no denying that the whole roast giba had a tremendous visual impact. It had been cooked to a deep brown and shrunk a fair bit, and was now sitting there atop the board on full display. A good number of young children in particular gathered around, curiosity shining bright in their eyes.

I had already made a number of cuts along the giba's back in order to make certain it had been properly heated through, and now I inserted my knife vertically along those cuts and began slicing off bits of sirloin.

The surface of the skin had lost all moisture and become quite crispy, so it made a light crackling noise as I cut through it. The thick layer of fat in-between the skin and meat had also dried up and become a gelatinous substance. The meat that lay even further down, however, was moist and tender. It was remarkably less tough than ordinary grilled meat.

The hunters of the forest's edge didn't care for tender meat, but with how delicious the end result was, they would probably still be able to appreciate it. Once I had cut out a large square chunk of meat, I placed it onto a plate that Bartha was holding out toward me.

"Please bring this one to the leading clan head Donda Ruu, and this one to the victor of the contest of strength, Jiza Ruu."

"Got it," Bartha said with a casual nod, heading over toward the winner's stand. After watching her for a moment out of the corner of my eye, I directed a smile at all the children around me.

"Thanks for waiting. I'll go ahead and cut some off for you now."

"Yay!" the kids shouted with joy. And from there, I just kept cutting meat.

I didn't just cut from the back, but also the legs and rump too. Only the innards had been removed from the hunk of meat. The tough tendons had

softened up, so I faced less resistance than expected. It was now easy to separate the meat from the bone. People kept on coming my way continuously, and the thirty kilos or so of meat steadily dwindled.

“If you’re enjoying the taste, then go ahead and give these sauces a try too,” I said, adding some to the meat I had just cut. One was a salty-sweet sauce made using tau oil, sugar, and fruit wine as a base, while the other was a substitute ponzu made using lemon-like sheel juice, mamaria vinegar, and tau oil. Once I poured those over the thigh and rib meat, I handed the plate to Bartha again. Jiza Ruu couldn’t move from the stand for the time being, while Donda Ruu showed no signs of leaving his seat either, so it was necessary to serve them like this.

“Ah, this is all delicious. How is it that it tastes even better than ordinary grilled meat?” a woman whose face I recognized but whose name I didn’t know asked with a smile.

As I placed one cut of meat after another onto the plates Ai Fa was holding out to be served to the others, I smiled back, “It really is strange, isn’t it? The only difference is how long it’s heated through. But by slowly roasting it, you get this tenderness and flavor.”

Just the right amount of moisture and fat had been removed, giving the meat a different sort of texture compared to simply grilling it. And it had a delicious condensed umami flavor too. On top of that, you could enjoy cuts from all over the body. That was the real pleasure provided by a whole roast.

Though I had prepared the sauce and ponzu to go with it, it was perfectly tasty just on its own. Plus, the dynamic appearance was perfect for a banquet. It was a good fit for the people of the forest’s edge, who saw eating meat as bringing the giba’s strength into themselves. And that mental impression would surely only make it taste all the better.

After around ten minutes or so, the crowd finally started to thin out. Everyone must have at least gotten a bite, and now half the giba was nothing but bones.

“I doubt you’re satisfied with just getting a few little bites to eat off of this thing, right, Ai Fa? I’m fine here, so why not go try some of the other food?”

“You still can’t leave yet?”

“No, since this would be too difficult for other people to cut on their own. But I figure I’ll take my time enjoying everything else once I finish removing the rest of the meat.”

“Then I’ll wait too.”

Ai Fa remained seated ramrod straight on the cloth, bandages wrapped around her abdomen. With her hands placed on top of her knees, she really did strike a gallant figure.

“You really don’t need to worry about me. I mean, Granny Jiba is joining in too, right?”

“I was able to talk with her during the day. And besides, since I’m not currently hunting giba, I don’t get especially hungry.”

“Huh. Is that so? You seemed to have a pretty healthy appetite when we were eating back at the Fa house.”

“Food is essential for healing wounds. But now that I’ve been stuck in the house for half a month, I certainly don’t need all that much.”

That was rather sad to hear as a chef, but it wasn’t as if I couldn’t understand how she felt. Back when she had injured her left arm, she still trained everything else so she wouldn’t get rusty, but with a broken rib, there was a pretty hard limit on what she could do. And considering how active she had generally been up until recently, it was no surprise that she would need less food now.

“If I kept eating as I had been, I would end up putting on excess fat. Look, can’t you see it already?”

“Huh? You think so?”

I hadn’t noticed anything like that, so I quickly scanned her with my eyes. No matter how I looked at it, her graceful figure appeared the same as it had ever been. Her frame was long and slender, her waist was tight, and she had no excess fat on her whatsoever. She was both elegant and strong—the perfect image of a female hunter.

But just as I was thinking that, a palm suddenly smacked me in the face.

With a “Gah,” I righted my line of sight and found Ai Fa with a red face and a wildcat’s glare for some reason.

“Don’t stare at me like that. It’s rude.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I looked because you told me to!”

“Quiet, you,” Ai Fa retorted, turning away in a huff.

I felt like my pulse was going to start rising to match hers, so I went ahead and resumed my work.

Then Rimee Ruu came running over. “Huh? You’re still working on it? We’ve all started taking turns eating, though.”

“Yeah, but this is a task that I need more practice on, myself. I can’t leave it to anyone else.”

“I see. Then could I have some more?! Tari Ruu brought me a plate before, and it was super tasty!”

“Glad to hear it. In that case, why don’t I give you a cut that you don’t get to eat all that often?” I said, cutting the giba’s face free from its skull.

Since they usually removed the pelt, there was hardly ever anything left to eat around the face. In fact, even now I was more peeling it off than actually cutting it. However, there was a really springy layer of fat or something hidden there under the crispy cooked skin. Unfortunately, the ears were rather burnt, but the texture of the skin on its face seemed similar to the Okinawan pig ears dish I was familiar with.

I stacked those shaved flakes of facial meat on top of the plate that Rimee Ruu was holding out. The young girl tilted her head and took a bite, and joy blossomed over her little face. “It’s all crispy and chewy and tasty! I love giba skin!”

“Yeah, giba skin’s good, isn’t it? And you usually don’t get to eat it. All right, let’s go ahead and handle the whole head now...”

After cutting the head free from the body and peeling off all the meat and skin, I went ahead and removed the lower jaw. The tongue inside had also been properly heated through and had turned all white. It was definitely a part worth

eating. I cut it up into chunks big enough that each one still had a good amount of volume to it, and then laid them out atop suurub leaves so that anyone could grab them.

Next I carved out the eyeballs and removed the brain from the skull. They were uncommon parts, so I ended up presenting them to Donda and Jiza Ruu alongside several slices of tongue with some ponzu sauce, though I didn't know if the organs would suit their tastes.

In the meantime, folks were still coming by occasionally, so I also sliced off more of the more ordinary cuts of meat like ribs and leg. In less than thirty minutes, that thirty-kilo giba was reduced to nothing but bones.

"Okay, that's the last thing I needed to do for work today!"

"Huh? Who's that plate for? If it's for Papa Donda, want me to take it to him for you?" Rimee Ruu asked.

"No, this is Lem Dom's portion. She's hiding out so the folks from the Zaza clan don't see her. Ai Fa, I want to deliver this first. Is that okay?"

"I don't mind."

And so, I ended up bringing Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu along with me to the agreed-upon location.

The banquet was still in full swing with no signs of slowing down. After weaving through the crowd, we circled around to the rear of the house where Bartha and Jeeda were staying.

"Oh, you came too, Ai Fa?" a voice called out as a tall figure appeared from the shadows. "Things sure seem lively over at the banquet. Meanwhile, I'm so hungry it feels like my stomach's about to shrivel up into nothing."

"Sorry about that. I had work I had to handle. For now, hopefully this'll help you stave off starvation."

"What, this is all you have for me?"

"Donda Ruu set a condition for giving you the food his clan prepared. I didn't think there would be an issue, but I wanted to be sure before I brought it over." As I handed over the plate, I repeated what Donda Ruu had to say, "You should

“speak with the Dom clan head before the end of the violet month. If you promise to do so, you can have as much food as you please.”

“Hmm, so he wants me to reconcile with Deek before the month is through?”

“Yeah. Or at least, he thinks if nothing else, you should have a real discussion and share your feelings honestly. Even though Donda Ruu has no intention of interfering with the internal affairs of the Dom clan, he can’t give his approval to you living separately from your family either.”

That was only natural, considering how greatly the people of the forest’s edge valued blood ties.

“Got it,” Lem Dom replied with a shrug of her shoulders. “I’ve been away from the Dom clan for nearly two months now. And considering the strength I’ve gained since then, it’s probably about time.”

“Do you think Deek Dom will listen to your request?”

“Couldn’t say. But, well, if it’s just not possible, then I guess I’ll finally have to cast aside the Dom name.”

When she heard that, Ai Fa’s brow furrowed deeply. “Lem Dom, if you’re going to cast aside your family, then what exactly is your reason for becoming a hunter? A hunter should work for their family above all else.”

“Oh? But you kept working as a hunter even after you lost your family, didn’t you? Even without family, it should still be possible to live with a hunter’s pride,” Lem Dom firmly stated, and then she smiled. “Of course, I do love Deek, and all of my relatives are precious to me. But even so, I want to live without stifling my own feelings. And if that isn’t allowable, then the forest shall surely take my soul.”

“I see,” Ai Fa said with a shake of her head. “If your resolve is that solid, then I won’t try to stop you. Live in the way that you believe in.”

“Right, thanks. I think that might be the first time you’ve ever truly accepted my feelings, Ai Fa,” Lem Dom remarked with a joyful smile. It wasn’t her usual cynical grin, but something a lot more innocent, like a child’s.

However, that smile suddenly froze, and Ai Fa turned around with a

questioning look.

“So this is where you were hiding, Lem Dom...” a woman said as her slender figure appeared from the shadow of the house. Her long hair was worn in a single braid down over her right shoulder, and she had a piercing gaze. It was Sufira Zaza. “I knew you would try to watch the contest of strength between the hunters. And now we finally meet again, Lem Dom...”

“S-Sufira Zaza...” Lem Dom stuttered in an unsteady voice, stepping backward. This was the first time I’d ever seen her so out of sorts.

“I can’t believe you!” Sufira Zaza exclaimed, rushing over like a bullet, pushing right past the three of us and springing at Lem Dom. “You’ve been away from the Dom clan for two months now! Don’t you care about how other people feel?!”

“Gah, hold on...! D-Don’t just stand there watching! Somebody help me!” Lem Dom wailed, but I didn’t sense any animosity from Sufira Zaza. Rather, she was clinging to Lem Dom’s chest and had started to sob.

“Don’t you know how much we worried...? You cast aside your life as a woman to live as a hunter... I could never bear such a fate...”

“Wh-What are you crying for?! Let go of me, Sufira Zaza!”

Sufira Zaza just shook her head in protest, hugging Lem Dom’s body tighter. Even though it should have been easy for Lem Dom to escape with just her sheer strength, she instead stared upward with a deeply troubled expression and heaved a heavy sigh.

After watching the spectacle those two were putting on for a bit, Rimee Ruu tugged at the hem of Ai Fa’s clothing. “Hey, I’m getting hungry again.”

“Right, we should return to the banquet.”

“You’re abandoning me, Ai Fa?!” Lem Dom called out.

“I’m doing no such thing. That is yet another challenge to overcome on the path to living as you wish, Lem Dom.”

“You’re heartless!” Lem Dom wailed as we left her and Sufira Zaza alone and returned to the plaza.

Though I felt bad for her, of course, this wasn't something we should've been sticking our noses into, as members of other clans. As Ai Fa said, if Lem Dom couldn't convince her relatives, she wouldn't be able to continue down the path she believed in.

"She's fortunate to have a relative who thinks of her that much," Ai Fa noted.

"That's true. Sufira Zaza sure is an emotional person!" I said.

And so, Ai Fa and I finally got to enjoy the food the Ruu clan had prepared. I hadn't lent them any assistance this time around. They had cooked it entirely on their own.

When we approached the nearest gathering of people, we found that they were members of the Rutim clan having a friendly chat around a hastily prepared stove where a pot was being heated.

"Ah, if it isn't Asuta and Ai Fa! It's been a while! That meat from earlier was incredibly tasty!" Dan Rutim exclaimed as Ama Min Rutim handed him some rib meat intentionally left on the bone.

In addition to Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim, Morun Rutim (whom I hadn't seen in a while) and the elder Raa Rutim were both there, which made this a gathering of the whole main Rutim house.

It was my first time seeing Morun Rutim in a month or so, and she looked just as lively as always. She was a fifteen-year-old girl with a bit of plumpness to her. Just like her father Dan Rutim, her big round eyes suited her really well. And her bright, cheerful smile hadn't changed at all.

"Long time no see, Asuta. Would you like to have some of this soup dish?"

"Thanks, Morun Rutim. I'd love some."

This was the special stew that Reina and Sheera Ruu had developed on their own. After preparing giba sirloin in a teriyaki style, they then boiled it in a tarapa soup. Though they used something I had come up with as a basis for that soup, it now had a completely different flavor to it.

The ingredients they used included tarapa, aria, myamuu, sugar, fruit wine, pico leaves, chitt seeds, and a variety of herbs, creating a flavor that felt like

something between Italian and Asian cuisine.

They had struck a sublime balance between sourness, sweetness, and spiciness, and then added poitan to give the dish some creaminess. And teriyaki alone wouldn't produce a sufficient giba meat stock, so they had added some finely chopped bits of various cuts.

As for the key giba teriyaki itself, they had made a sauce by combining tau oil and panam honey and steeped the meat in that, adding further depth to the dish. If they had made a single misstep it could have ended up with a really convoluted flavor like the cooking from the castle town, but it seemed like they had managed to come right up to that line without crossing it. Undoubtedly, their encounter with Varkas had had an impact on them.

The other ingredients they used, in addition to tino, nenon, and the staple aria, were the arugula-like ro'hoyi, the paprika-like ma pula, and the zucchini-like chan. Reina and Sheera Ruu were planning to alternate between selling this and their giba hot pot stew starting the day after tomorrow. It was their answer to the proposal that we should try to find ways to spread the usage of ingredients from the castle town.

They had used so many different things in the stew, but the flavors didn't clash at all. From what I could remember, the two of them had started experimenting on this dish after meeting Myme, so that meant they had been working on perfecting the flavor for two months now. They must have also been strongly influenced by Myme and Mikel's belief that the flavor of each ingredient ought to be used to its fullest. The impression I got was that the shock Varkas had inflicted on them and the impact of meeting Myme had been blended together right there in that pot.

Rather than someone who worked off of a preestablished foundation like myself, it seemed like the women of the forest's edge with their underdeveloped culinary practices were like sponges absorbing new knowledge. Though they were still messing around with trial and error, Reina and Sheera Ruu's strong wills and desire to challenge themselves had brought them to this accomplishment after a great deal of effort.

"This is a wonderful dish. Even though it uses a great many unfamiliar

ingredients, I can sense how much strength it will grant us,” Ama Min Rutim stated.

Even if they had been influenced by Varkas, their thoughts had been focused on their own people when making it. That was precisely why it didn’t end up with an offbeat flavor despite all the ingredients, instead seeming somehow gentle yet also filled with a great vitality.

It could prove difficult for any of the other women to reproduce such a carefully calculated dish, so I didn’t know if it was right to call it a recipe of the forest’s edge, but it was undoubtedly a recipe belonging to Reina and Sheera Ruu.

“Reina and Sheera Ruu certainly have grown quite a bit more skilled while I was away. I’m truly surprised,” Morun Rutim said with an amused smile. She looked very happy to be reunited with her family for the first time in a month.

And of course, the same was true for her family welcoming her back. Dan Rutim went without saying, but even the usually strict-looking Raa Rutim seemed so much gentler tonight.

“Gazraan Rutim, I was surprised to see how much you’ve grown,” Ai Fa unexpectedly chimed in after I had chatted a bit with the folks from the Rutim clan. “You’ve gained so much strength in just the last few months that you seem like a completely different man compared to how you were at the last festival of the hunt.”

“And yet, I still couldn’t overcome Jiza Ruu,” Gazraan Rutim replied with a gentle smile. “I do believe that I’m stronger than I have ever been, and yet Jiza Ruu has reached even greater heights still. This is perhaps the worst disappointment I have ever felt when losing in a contest of strength.”

“Aw, that’s just how it had to go! After all, Jiza Ruu was in a position where he couldn’t afford to lose this time around!” Dan Rutim chimed in while holding a bottle of fruit wine in one hand and sounding like he was really enjoying himself. “After all, Donda Ruu couldn’t participate in this festival of the hunt! As his heir, I’m sure Jiza Ruu wanted to make sure he didn’t lose to anyone from the subordinate clans. Even more so, considering the fact that the Ruu are not only our parent clan, but one of the leading clans now!”

“Then just like Jiza Ruu, I was able to show more strength than ever because my powerful father was not participating?”

“Of course! And even though you had a lot of resolve, Gazraan, Jiza Ruu had just a little bit more. Because the Ruu couldn’t afford to show weakness to their subordinate clan, the Rutim! The match was decided by that tiny difference alone!” Dan Rutim said with a guffaw, patting his beloved son on the back. “Still, that match really got my old heart pounding! I’m just as proud to have a son like you as I am to have a strong parent clan like the Ruu! And the fact that you fought that well against Jiza Ruu should take care of the frustration you’re feeling after a while!”

Eventually, Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim would retire from hunting completely, leaving Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim to lead their people. Regardless of whether that day was five or even ten years in the future, it would still eventually come. I found it difficult to imagine, but now that Dan Rutim had yielded the seat of clan head to Gazraan Rutim, that future seemed a bit more real to me.

I couldn’t help but wonder what Donda and Jiza Ruu were feeling right now.

After saying farewell to the folks from the Rutim clan, we went on a search for more food to eat and people to talk to.

4

The Ruu clan’s dishes had all turned out wonderfully, and they had prepared quite a variety of them. First on the list was the giba cutlets that the people of the forest’s edge adored. Then they had myamuu giba, meatballs, spare ribs with sweet sauce, rib meat and nanaar sauté, a meat and vegetable stir-fry that had a pretty good amount of the latter, mashed chatchi, dried kiki and sheema salad, and on and on, making a really great mix of dishes.

There were two among them that especially drew my attention. One was the herb-grilled giba sirloin. Of the eight herbs in my giba curry, they had taken the three that provided the base for the dish’s spiciness and aroma, and grilled some meat with them. That rather curry-like flavor paired really well with the strong fattiness of the meat. This was yet another original dish Reina and Sheera Ruu had invented.

The second was a stew using the white fruit wine from Banarm. They had apparently flavored the dish using tau oil and sugar, and just a bit of white mamaria vinegar as a secret ingredient. It was a dish that emphasized sweetness, with a fragrant aroma from the fruit wine. Reina Ruu said it still needed adjustment, but I thought that it was already plenty good.

Though the teriyaki stew would be difficult to reproduce, it wouldn't take long for the other women to learn how to make those two dishes. And even better, I was seriously glad to see Reina and Sheera Ruu showing more and more originality in their cooking.

It was also noteworthy that Rimee Ruu had even presented her desserts off to the side of the plaza. That included the karon milk chatchi mochi, the steamed pudding, and a kind of sweet baked poitan that surely took inspiration from Toor Deen. Though she didn't make anywhere near as much of them as the other dishes, there were lots of women and children gathering around and looking really happy with them.

"Ah, so I finally get to see you, Asuta, Ai Fa." As we were enjoying those dishes, Rau and Yamiru Lea approached us. "Where have you been hiding? I've been looking for you this whole time!" Rau Lea complained.

"Oh, really? Do you have some sort of business with us?"

"What, you can't meet up with friends without any business to take care of? Come on, don't be so cold!" he retorted, putting me in a sleeper hold.



“Ow, ow! That hurts, Rau Lea! Are you drunk?”

“This is a banquet! What’s wrong with getting drunk?!”

That might have been a valid argument, but I still needed to protect my precious neckbones. After all, if he forgot his strength he could easily snap my neck in an instant.

“Hey, no matter how drunk you get, you can’t go laying a hand on a member of another clan like that,” Ai Fa warned, grabbing hold of Rau Lea’s wrist.

After letting me go, Rau Lea shot Ai Fa a glare like a hunting dog’s. “I remember getting lectured like this at the last festival of the hunt too... Aren’t you a bit too soft on Asuta, Ai Fa?”

“It’s a clan head’s duty to protect those under them. If anything, you’re too rough with someone who isn’t even a hunter.” Ai Fa had the look of a wildcat in her eyes. The atmosphere between the two of them was getting pretty tense.

Rimee Ruu looked a bit worried, while Yamiru Lea had her usual sour look on her face as she shrugged.

“You’re acting pretty tough for someone who can’t even hunt right now, Ai Fa.”

“Even if I am injured, it would still be a simple task to take down a drunkard, Rau Lea.”

“I see. Your hunter’s vision is just as sharp as Ludo Ruu’s, isn’t it?” Rau Lea remarked, stepping forward and bringing his face close to my clan head’s. “So in that case, why don’t you tell me? Am I really that weak?”

“What?”

“In the last contest of strength, you took me down. And in this one, I lost to Shin Ruu and Mida. If I can’t beat someone smaller than me or bigger than me, then just what exactly am I doing wrong?”

“The size of one’s body is just one source of strength. And you are one of the foremost hunters under the Ruu.”

“But I’ve never beaten Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim. And Jiza Ruu and Gazraan

Rutim seem to be about as strong as they are now too. Plus, if I can't beat Shin Ruu or Mida, that means I'm no match for Ludo or Darmu Ruu either. Doesn't that make me kinda pathetic?!" Rau Lea whined like a spoiled child, pressing in even closer to Ai Fa. But my clan head had steadily regained her calm, so she stepped an equal distance back.

"The names you listed all belong to hunters who are exceptionally skilled even for the Ruu clan. At the very least, you match up well against Mida and Shin Ruu, so you have nothing to feel ashamed of."

"But Jeeda is apparently about as strong as Ludo Ruu, and Giran Ririn had a close match with Gazraan Rutim! And I didn't contribute much of anything when we took down the lord of the forest!"

"But that's..."

"You were the one who dealt the finishing blow, Ai Fa. And you fought a close match with Dan Rutim too. Just how did you get so strong? I... I want to get stronger too!" Rau Lea was at the point where it seemed like he would start desperately clinging to Ai Fa if he could. And yet, the look in my clan head's eyes simply grew more and more calm.

"I believe I've already told you the answer to that question long ago. Ludo Ruu and I both have strong fathers, which made us frustrated about our weakness. That frustration drove us to become strong ourselves. I'm sure Shin Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, and even Jiza Ruu had similar thoughts when they entered this contest of strength. That was why they were able to show more strength than ever before."

"Then I...!"

"You now feel much the same way, and so you will grow stronger from here on out."

"You think?" Rau Lea asked with a disappointed slump of his shoulders. This was the first time I had ever seen him so listless.

"Cheer up! You made it into the top eight twice in a row, didn't you? I'm sure you'll get lots of women asking to marry you today," Rimee Ruu cheerfully chimed in, which I hoped would finally cut through the tension in the air.

However, Rau Lea didn't perk up in the least.

"Marriage, huh...? I don't feel like dealing with that right now. There aren't many available women as beautiful as Ai Fa and Yamiru Lea, anyway." Ai Fa's eyebrows instantly raised, while Yamiru Lea turned away. "Maybe I've got a thing for brazen women? I mean, I think these two are just way too pretty."

"U-Um, Rau Lea..." Rimee Ruu started to say.

"But Ai Fa is a hunter, so I can't take her for a bride. In that case, I guess I should just go ahead and marry Yamiru Lea."

"It is utterly unacceptable to be considered for marriage as a second best option! Besides, the other members of the Lea clan would never give their approval," Yamiru Lea snapped.

"That's not true at all. Sure, you're a bit on the older side, but that's nothing to worry about. And there's only four years between us anyway, right?"

"As if it was my age that was the issue..." Yamiru Lea coldly replied, before gracefully turning her back to him. "If we remain here any longer, our relationship with the Fa clan will likely start to sour again. And you two haven't had a proper meal yet, have you? I believe you should simply ignore this drunkard and focus on satisfying your hunger instead."

"Hey! When the head of a clan is feeling weak, isn't it the members' duty to support him?!"

With that, the pair from the Lea clan disappeared into the crowd while having a friendly argument.

Feeling rather dumbfounded, I turned toward Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu.

"Um, my stomach's still only about sixty percent full, so why don't we keep on enjoying the banquet?" I suggested.

"Yeah, let's eat!" Rimee Ruu agreed.

Though a fair bit of time had gone by at this point, the banquet showed no signs of slowing down. We advanced into the plaza, passing through a crowd of people whose cheeks were flushed from the liquor and excitement.

Some people were seated atop the cloths, while others were standing as they

bit into some meat. With folks sharing drinks and what sounded like a grass whistle ringing out from somewhere, the banquet was finally in full swing.

In addition to the plates the Ruu had at home, we also made full use of the ones for the stalls, so there were no issues on that front. And we also had water jugs prepared, so if we ran short of plates, we could always wash some to use them again. Everyone seemed pretty accustomed to the buffet style of meal, where they just grabbed whatever they wanted, as I didn't spy any confusion or chaos.

It looks like everyone is really enjoying themselves.

Reina Ruu was sitting on a cloth surrounded by a large crowd of women. She was probably being asked all sorts of cooking questions. There were a number of young men gathered some distance away too, perhaps waiting for Reina Ruu to be available.

Atop the neighboring cloth, Shin and Lala Ruu were huddling close to one another. But in front of the two of them there was a younger person passionately jabbering at Shin Ruu, while Lala Ruu looked a bit annoyed. I couldn't see clearly from so far away, but the youth looked rather small. I wondered if it was Deem Rutim.

Deem Rutim was a young member of the Rutim branch houses. Since he had been one of our guards on the trip to Dabagg, he had left a strong impression on me.

Maybe he was impressed by how Shin Ruu fought. Now that I think about it, Deem Rutim was always pretty frustrated with his own inexperience...

But Deem Rutim was still only thirteen, having just become a hunter. Though it was difficult to imagine now, Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim must have been young once too, and Shin Ruu and Deem Rutim would be walking down the path their elders had forged together.

Even further past them, I could see Lem Dom walking around and chewing some meat. She looked really displeased, with Sufira Zaza hanging onto her other arm. They were heading toward the ritual flame, so perhaps they were on their way to greet Donda Ruu.

“Hey, Vina! What’re you doing over there?” Rimee Ruu questioned before darting off.

Vina Ruu was standing on her own in the dim light, slightly removed from the crowd.

“Oh, Rimee, and Asuta and Ai Fa too... I’m not particularly doing anything at all...” Vina Ruu replied, staring off toward something in the distance.

In an even dimmer area on the outskirts of the plaza, there seemed to be two figures having an argument. It wasn’t Rau and Yamiru Lea, though. No, it seemed to be a man and a woman with an even greater height difference between them.

“Hmm? Is that Darmu and Sheera Ruu?” I asked.

“Yes... It seemed like they were going to start drawing attention, so I dragged them over there...”

“What’s going on with them? Seems like things are getting turbulent over there.”

“Yes, they are... I was enjoying some fruit wine with Darmu, and then Sheera Ruu came over to tell him he should refrain from drinking when injured...”

Darmu Ruu had had his right palm skinned during the battle with the lord of the forest. It was bad enough that he still couldn’t resume hunting giba or even participate in the contest of strength.

“But he *has* refrained from drinking fruit wine for the last half a month, so I suggested he could probably handle just a little... What should I do?”

“Hmm. It’s probably fine, right? He’s the one who decided to drink, so you’ve got nothing to worry about,” Rimee Ruu said with a smile. “And besides, Sheera Ruu is just worried about Darmu! It’s a good thing that she can speak her mind to him now.”

“You think...?” Vina Ruu questioned, bringing a slender finger up to her forehead.

It was then that another large and small pair approached from the lively center of the plaza. However, this time around the woman was the bigger of

the two.

“What are you doing over here off to the side? If you don’t mind, could we join in?”

It was Bartha and Jeeda. They were both holding plates, and Jeeda was biting into an herb-grilled sirloin as he walked.

“Hey there, Jeeda. It’s been quite a day, hasn’t it?” I greeted, not wanting to advertise the delicate situation going on between Darmu and Sheera Ruu. As he silently bit into his meat, the boy nodded back.

Since Jeeda had taken off his cloak, he seemed to be even smaller than usual. He had to be even shorter than Vina Ruu. I eyeballed him at around 160 centimeters tall, and he was incredibly slender too. His messy hair was red like flame, and his yellow eyes had a bestial shine to them. Still, his expression wasn’t as sour today as it usually was, so he looked more like his actual age of fourteen.

“You showed some remarkable skill today. Though Ludo Ruu has grown much stronger recently, you proved yourself to be comparable in ability,” Ai Fa stated, only for Jeeda to swallow his food and tilt his head.

“That contest of strength between hunters is supposed to be a sacred event to show your strength to the forest, right? But I just got dragged into it without even understanding how a hunter is supposed to show their strength without a blade or a bow.”

“Hmm... A contest of strength between hunters is an event in which you are meant to wring out every last bit of strength you have while also taking care not to harm your opponent. And I believe you displayed your strength just fine, Jeeda.”

“I really just don’t get it...” Jeeda replied, biting into the meat again.

“Jeeda here prefers shooting from a distance with a bow. You get more out of it when Ludo Ruu competes with you on that front, right?” Bartha chimed in, sounding like she was enjoying herself, only for her son to shoot her an annoyed look.

“I only did that because he was so persistent about challenging me. Why is he

so fixated on me anyway?”

“Probably because you’re even younger than he is. There aren’t many hunters in your age group who can match him,” I interjected. “Now that I think about it, Ludo Ruu will be turning sixteen soon, but when is your birthday, Jeeda?”

“I’m not a person of the forest’s edge, so I don’t have one.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Oh, yes, you people of the forest’s edge keep track of the day you were born, right? But there’s no custom of celebrating such a day in the western kingdom at large,” Bartha replied. “The year will be coming to a close soon, and when that happens, everyone will grow a year older all at once. Then Jeeda will be fifteen, and I’ll be thirty-five.”

“Oh, I see. I didn’t know that.”

In that case, even though Tara was the same age as Rimee Ruu right now, she would be pulling ahead to the age of nine a bit earlier.

“You did throw that celebration for Sati Lea Ruu just a little while ago. And there’s this festival of the hunt too. You guys have some pretty fun traditions to balance out all those strict rules.”

Sati Lea Ruu’s birthday had apparently been in the indigo month. Though I had been summoned for Lala Ruu and Granny Tito Min’s birthday celebrations, they didn’t call on me for that one. I wasn’t certain whether that was because they could make delicious food all on their own now, or perhaps because her husband Jiza Ruu didn’t wish for it.

“But, well, it’s not like we had much proper human interaction back at Masara. You should be glad that a fine hunter like Ludo Ruu set his sights on you, Jeeda. And we’re nothing but grateful to Donda Ruu for letting us stay here in the settlement.”

Jeeda’s expression grew even more sulky as Bartha talked. No doubt, that was because he didn’t want his relationship with his mother on full display in front of others. But thinking about the complicated lives those two had lived, I was sure they’d eventually patch things up just fine.

As I was thinking about that, Sheera and Darmu Ruu walked back over. One wore a calm expression, while the other looked thoroughly displeased.

Observing the pair and the contrasting emotions they were showing, Vina Ruu awkwardly asked, “My... Have you finally settled things? Is everything okay now?”

“Yes. My apologies for causing you to worry,” Sheera Ruu replied with a deep bow. Then with a restrained yet firm gaze, she stared straight at Vina Ruu. “Still, it is my viewpoint that wine is a poison when one is suffering from injuries. At the very least, one should refrain from drinking until all bleeding stops.”

“My apologies... I thought it would be fine since Rau Lea is gulping the stuff down, and his injuries were more serious...”

“Open wounds can heal to a degree in half a month, but in Darmu Ruu’s case, he needs fresh skin to grow in, so it will require much more time.”

“Sorry, that was careless of me...” Vina Ruu replied, hanging her head and looking dejected.

Darmu Ruu, meanwhile, rustled his hair and said to Sheera Ruu, “We already settled things, so you needn’t go over it again. As long as I stay away from the wine, you’ll be satisfied, right?”

“I know it must be difficult to refrain from drinking fruit wine at a banquet, but please take proper care of yourself, Darmu Ruu,” Sheera Ruu answered with a pained look.

“Yeah, that’s right!” Rimee Ruu chimed in. “By the way, I saw you turn down fruit wine earlier, Sheera Ruu. Are you holding back for Darmu’s sake? If you’re gonna go that far, then Darmu needs to put up with it too!”

Sheera Ruu’s face instantly went bright red, and Darmu Ruu looked perplexed.

“How would that be for my sake? Well, I guess if you tried to brazenly lecture me with breath that stank of booze, I might not have listened...”

“Never mind that!” Barthia said. “Let’s just enjoy the food! Even if you can’t drink, everything else that they’re serving today is delicious, right?” Thanks to

her jumping in to mediate, we all started heading back to the celebration. After all, though we had ended up taking a long detour, Ai Fa and I had been looking for more food to eat before all this happened.

We approached the nearest pot, inside which a white mamaria vinegar stew was heating up. Since we were fine eating anything, we all went ahead and got a plate.

“Oh, is that the Fa clan head, Ai Fa?” one of the men standing there called out with a smile.

The man looked to be around Bartha’s age. He had a medium build, and the wrinkles around his eyes gave off a gentle impression.

“Indeed. And you are the clan head of the Ririn, correct?”

“So you know me? That’s an honor.” Realizing that this was Giran Ririn, who I had heard so much about earlier, I quickly looked over at him. I could recognize him by his hair that seemed to be going prematurely gray. “You got those injuries taking down the lord of the forest, from what I hear. I was planning on challenging you first if you had participated in this contest of strength.”

“You’re a splendid hunter. And that was a truly excellent match you had with Gazraan Rutim,” Ai Fa replied, staring straight back at him. “From what I’ve been told, you prevented the Ririn name from dying out despite the fact that it only had four members. As a fellow clan head, I’m truly impressed.”

“It’s nothing so incredible. The person I fell for just happened to be a subordinate of the Ruu clan.”

In other words, this man had been the one to first approach the Lea woman who had eventually married him. It was really something else, for a clan on the verge of extinction to ask to take a woman under the Ruu as a bride.

“If anything deserves to be admired here, it’s Donda Ruu’s generosity in welcoming the Ririn as a subordinate clan. All I did was desperately beg him for that,” Giran Ririn remarked, and then he turned and shot me a smile too. “And you’re Asuta of the Fa clan, aren’t you? Though I’ve seen you a number of times from a distance, I hadn’t thought that you were such a gentle-faced youth. Back at the wedding feast, you didn’t falter even a single step when facing those men

from the Suun clan.”

“Ah, that sure takes me back. It’s pretty embarrassing to think about now.”

“You have nothing to feel embarrassed about. You are not only a more skilled chef than any other, but you also possess a hunter’s courage. That’s simply wonderful,” Giran Ririn replied, the wrinkles around his eyes growing more pronounced. “We’ve gained so much strength and happiness thanks to the delicious food you brought us. It may be rather late to do so, but I wish to offer my thanks. Apparently, the majority of the food today was prepared by the women from our clans, but they never would have been able to do so without you,” he added, and then slurped some white mamaria vinegar stew. “Yes, this is truly delicious! I hope the Ririn women will become this skilled before long as well! Then I’ll be able to hunt more giba than ever before.”

Something about his demeanor made me break out in a smile of my own before I realized it.

The man certainly did have an unusual air about him. He might have been the most kind and gentle man I had met so far here at the forest’s edge. If I had to compare him to anyone, the most similar person I could think of would probably be the Sauti elder, Moga Sauti. Though he was still a healthy, active hunter, that sense of maturity he had just made you want to smile.

Though Gazraan Rutim and Dari Sauti are both calm and gentle, they still feel really formidable. But how should I put it...? He feels more like a rippling stream.

In just a short time, I had been thoroughly charmed by Giran Ririn. I couldn’t help but feel I should have watched more closely to see exactly how someone like him had defeated Mida and Ji Maam, and fought a close match with Gazraan Rutim. I noticed now that Ji Maam was here too. The Ririn had apparently taken in a husband from the Maam, so perhaps they were fairly close.

“I also wished to challenge the Fa clan head. What a shame it was that we couldn’t,” Ji Maam added with his rumbling voice. The man was nearly two meters tall, and had an especially rugged appearance. “I hope that the Fa clan will be invited to the next festival of the hunt as well, and that you can heal up before then.”

“An injury like this one should heal up in another half a month, but I can’t make any promises about the festival of the hunt. It feels like it would go against our customs for someone without any blood ties such as myself to keep attending.”

“As long as no taboos are broken, there’s no need to adhere so closely to customs. And besides, it’s a much greater deviation from our customs to welcome a townspeople such as Asuta as a clan member,” Giran Ririn remarked with a gentle smile. “All this joy has been brought into our lives because you aren’t someone who lets herself be bound by customs. As long as being invited to the Ruu festival of the hunt doesn’t cause you any difficulty, by all means, keep attending. We all would be glad to deepen our ties to the Fa clan further.”

Ai Fa silently nodded back.

Though other people might not have understood it as such, that action from Ai Fa showed a great deal of respect.

“Well then, why don’t we go ahead and try the next dish? I wonder if there’s any of those giba cutlets left?” Giran Ririn remarked as he left with a number of his comrades.

All that was left behind was a strangely peaceful feeling lingering in the air.

“The Ririn clan head is quite a relaxed man... I had heard he was a famed hunter, so I expected someone much wilder...” Vina Ruu noted.

“I knew about him from before! ’Cuz he gets along great with Papa Donda and Dan Rutim!” Rimee Ruu added.

With that, we started heading toward the next dish.

We went in the opposite direction so that we wouldn’t just meet up with the Ririn again right away. As we walked, I looked over at Ai Fa’s face illuminated by the bonfire.

“Giran Ririn was an interesting guy. I really enjoy talking with people like him,” I said.

“Is that so? I also find him to be someone worthy of respect,” Ai Fa calmly replied while staring straight ahead. “It’s no small thing to save a clan on the

verge of dying out. That is something even my own father couldn't do... And neither can I."

"Well, that has to do with not just the number of clan members, but the composition too. And besides, we're in a bit of a unique position," I replied quietly so that nobody else could hear. "Still, I'm sure the Fa name will always be remembered throughout the forest's edge. I mean, you just took down the lord of the forest. That's huge. And Dari Sauti said he plans to pass the tale on to his descendants."

"Yes, well, *you've* brought an incredible amount of change to the forest's edge and made everyone's lives much happier at the same time."

"Right. And I'm going to keep giving everything I've got so my reputation doesn't decrease. After all, I don't want to sully the Fa clan's name."

At that, Ai Fa turned and shot me a rather doubtful look. "This is not me feeling down, you know. I've known for years now that my decision to live as a hunter would mean the end of the Fa clan."

"I see. In that case, I guess there's no problem. Maybe I was just reading into things a bit too much because of what happened last time."

"Last time?" Ai Fa questioned, and then said, "Ah," with a shrug of her shoulders. "You mean during the previous festival of the hunt. Well, you seemed so terribly sad that I couldn't help but feel uneasy as well."

"Yeah, I know. You don't have to explain."

"You mean I don't have to remind you about how you ignored my feelings and started fretting by yourself, thus pushing me down into the depths of sorrow?"

"I said I know! I already apologized for my actions back then, didn't I?"

"Hmph," Ai Fa snorted, a smile showing in her eyes. "Don't bring up ancient history and then get all worked up about it. All it does is reveal your immaturity."

I gave a childish "Tch!" in response, but at the same time I felt relieved to see how calm Ai Fa appeared.

I couldn't say whether or not our situation had improved since then. But we

had shared our feelings with each other and were still living together. Since we were bringing each other happiness rather than sadness and despair, we must not have strayed from the proper path.

Now that I think back on it, it was my conversation with Darmu Ruu that made me worry so much.

Darmu Ruu had told me that if I made a real effort to convince her, Ai Fa would give up on being a hunter and live happily as a woman instead. His eyes had been filled with deep regret as he said it. But now, even if he looked terribly displeased, Darmu Ruu was here, walking beside Sheera Ruu and the rest of us.

A whole lot really had changed over these past couple months, and if we kept doing our best, we could be sure that things would keep getting better and not worse.

At any rate, I felt like my secret goal of making sure this festival of the hunt was a happy one had been accomplished with ease.

Intermezzo: At the Edge of the Banquet

“You finally made it into the top eight, Shin Ruu!” Lala Ruu said loudly between bites of food.

The banquet at the festival of the hunt was currently in full swing, and the pair was off to the side of the plaza. Since all the other people enjoying the event were starting to get really lively, nobody but Shin Ruu would have heard her. Even so, Shin Ruu still felt he needed to chide her.

“Lala Ruu, haven’t you already said that several times? I appreciate your congratulations, but don’t you think that’s enough now?”

“Huh? But you made it into the top eight! That’s pretty uncommon for someone as young as you! It’s really remarkable!”

Lala Ruu was always lively, but tonight she was overwhelming Shin Ruu. Her eyes, as blue as a clear sky, were sparkling brightly, and the red hair tied up atop her head seemed almost like a wagging tail. Ever since the contest of strength, her small, well-sculpted face had borne an especially bright and open smile, even for her.

“It’s strange... You don’t seem all that happy, Shin Ruu,” Lala Ruu remarked, her smile suddenly giving way to a look of concern. The way that her expressions could shift so wildly was one of the things that made the girl unique. “I’ve been the only one getting excited between us. Aren’t you happy to have made it this far, Shin Ruu?”

“Of course I’m happy. It’s something for me to be proud of.”

“Then why do you look so displeased?”

“Do I?”

“Yeah,” Lala Ruu replied, bringing her face real close. “You almost look like you’re still fighting in the contest of strength. If something’s bothering you, then you can talk about it with me.”

“No, not really... It’s not the sort of thing I should talk about with you, Lala Ruu.”

“What’s that mean?! You’re making me worry, and you won’t even tell me the reason why?!”

Her eyes looked turbulent with powerful emotions. Shin Ruu couldn’t help but feel that if he misspoke now she would get seriously angry, or perhaps even break down bawling. He racked his brain for the right words to avoid having that happen, if nothing else.

“It’s not that I can’t talk about it with you...but if I do, you’re sure to get exasperated with me. I mean, I feel that way already.”

“I don’t really get what you mean. Whatever you’re thinking about, I can’t imagine it’s *that* weird, Shin Ruu,” Lala Ruu remarked, her expression growing concerned. Her joy, anger, and worry were all because she was thinking of Shin Ruu. He couldn’t conceal his feelings from her now.

“It’s just, I feel frustrated...”

“Frustrated? About what?”

“About losing in the contest of strength.”

Lala Ruu’s eyes shot open wide in surprise.

“In the end, you lost to Jiza, right? You’re that upset about not being able to beat him?”

“It’s not just Jiza Ruu. Before that, I lost to Ludo Ruu too. I’m just bitter about my own shortcomings.”

After making a childish yet adorable face as she sucked in her lower lip, Lala Ruu retorted, “But today you beat Rau Lea, Ji Maam, and the second son of the Rutim! That’s amazing, isn’t it? I mean, Rau Lea is skilled enough to have made it into the top eight twice in a row!”

“But Rau Lea has trouble dealing with opponents like me who are smaller and quicker than he is. Besides, when we train together we generally trade wins and losses back and forth, so I figure it’s just by chance that I happened to win today.”

“Then what about Ji Maam and the second Rutim son? Those two are really strong hunters too, aren’t they? This is the first time that you’ve beat them!”

“Right. I’m proud of that, of course. But my frustration at losing to Jiza and Ludo Ruu is coming first.”

“I just don’t get it! Were you always this greedy, Shin Ruu? Lately, Jiza hasn’t lost to anyone but Papa Donda and Dan Rutim.”

“That’s why I said you’d be exasperated with me...”

Lala Ruu pulled back with a sour look on her face and sat down, her now empty plate and cradled her own knees.

“Did I make you angry?” Shin Ruu asked, feeling concerned.

“No,” Lala Ruu replied with a shake of her head. “I’m not mad. I’ve just got these pent-up feelings in my chest...”

“Does that mean you’re angry after all?”

“I told you, that’s not it. I just... I wanted to celebrate you making it into the top eight together,” she answered, looking downhearted like a child that had been chewed out, and that made Shin Ruu feel even more apologetic.

“Here you are congratulating me, but I made you worry because of my unreasonable concerns. I’m the one at fault here, so can you please cheer up?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Shin Ruu. But I can’t stand it...the fact that you’re still so down on yourself you can’t even be happy to have made it into the top eight,” Lala Ruu said as she stared at Shin Ruu with terribly sad eyes. “Is it because of that Sanjura man? You’ve become fixated on growing stronger ever since he kidnapped Asuta.”

“It’s true that he was the trigger, but I wouldn’t quite say it was his fault exactly. Rather, I should have realized my own weakness sooner.”

“You’re not weak, Shin Ruu. Jiza and Ludo are just special.”

“Yes. Something that makes them special... It’s not just Jiza and Ludo Ruu, but also Darmu Ruu, Ai Fa, and Gazraan Rutim who possess it. And I’m sure it comes down not to their bloodlines, but their attitudes,” Shin Ruu replied, uttering the words he felt deep in his heart.

Lala Ruu had been cradling her knees, but now she sat up straight and stared directly at Shin Ruu. Seeing the serious look in her eyes, Shin Ruu continued. "All the men of the main Ruu house possess a special strength. That's only natural, considering they inherited Donda Ruu's blood. But with that in mind, my father Ryada is Donda Ruu's younger brother. There shouldn't be that much of a difference in the mighty blood of the Ruu flowing through their veins. Besides, not just Gazraan Rutim of the main Rutim house, but even Ai Fa possesses that strength. Ai Fa is a hunter from a tiny clan, and yet she's so incredibly special... So what's important isn't the bloodline, but rather the mindset someone has."

"Right. So?"

"So the answer is that I must be lacking resolve. Up until the moment my father Ryada was taken down by a giba's tusks and lost the strength to work as a hunter, I had never even imagined such a thing could happen. We always put our lives on the line when hunting giba, and no matter how strong the hunter, they can perish out in the forest at any time... And yet, I didn't truly comprehend that fact. Because of the injuries my father suffered on the hunt, I finally realized how powerless I truly was."

The words just kept on flowing without end. Lala Ruu was listening intently. That serious look in her eyes gave Shin Ruu strength.

"My resolve isn't strong enough. I wanted to live with courage and pride, but I was still lacking as a person. I needed to become more desperate, and I was far too late in realizing that fact. That's why I've been trying so hard to run down the path we're on. If I had piled on more intense training like Jiza Ruu, Ludo Ruu, and Ai Fa...then that Sanjura man never would have gotten the better of me. And I find that fact frustrating."

"I see. If it had happened today, I'm sure you would have been able to prevent Asuta's kidnapping. You've grown so strong," Lala Ruu said, her smile returning.

Caught completely off guard, Shin Ruu held his tongue.

"Ever since what happened to Ryada Ruu, when you were made head of your house, you've worked incredibly hard. You've become as strong as Rau Lea, and

even reached the top eight today... The efforts you've put in are finally showing results. And that makes me incredibly happy to see."

"I suppose..."

"And I'm sure you can get a whole lot stronger still. You have such a strong drive pushing you to try even harder," Lala Ruu replied with an unchanging expression, resting her chin atop her knees. "And I want to keep watching over you as you do so. I'm sure someday you'll be the best hunter in all of the forest's edge."

Shin Ruu was struck by an unfamiliar feeling. As he stared at Lala Ruu's gentle smiling face, his chest steadily grew warmer. He felt a strong impulse welling up to hug her slender body tight. However, it was taboo at the forest's edge for men and women over the age of ten to touch unnecessarily, so Shin Ruu worked up the willpower to suppress that urge.

Not realizing what the young hunter was feeling, Lala Ruu stretched and declared, "Right, I've got to work harder too! Reina is one thing, but even Rimee has become a great chef now. I haven't been letting it get to me enough. I've just been impressed by how amazing they are."

"Hmm, I don't think there's any need to force yourself to feel frustrated."

"Yeah, but if even Vina starts to get better at cooking, that could leave me rushing to improve too. She's actually a pretty decent chef already!" Lala Ruu remarked, letting the whites of her teeth show in her usual sort of mischievous expression.

Shin Ruu placed his hand on his chest and desperately forced down the impulse swirling, burning inside of it. As he did, Lala Ruu started to look confused.

"What's the matter? Something seems off with you, somehow."

"I-It's nothing. I just felt happy."

"Happy? About what?"

"Well...how you said that you would watch over me."

"What are you saying?! It's only natural for me to do that!" Lala Ruu retorted

with a bashful smile. The faces she was showing him today were even more varied than usual. “Jiza’s one thing, but you should at least be able to beat Ludo soon! After all, you’re a year older than him!”

“Huh? What’s that about me?” a voice called out as a small figure approached from the center of the plaza. It was Ludo Ruu, holding ribs in both hands.

Lala Ruu turned his way with a daring grin and stuck out her tongue.

“Nothing. We’re just talking about Shin Ruu beating you, Ludo.”

“Ooh, I’ll be looking forward to it. Huh...? Wasn’t there a younger guy from the Rutim with you just a little while ago?”

“Yeah, Deem Rutim from the branch houses. I don’t really know why, but he was really persistent with his questions.”

“Hmm, he’s been feeling down ever since Dan Rutim got hurt because of him, so maybe he’s trying to learn from your strength, Shin Ruu,” Ludo Ruu remarked, biting into a rib. “Well, good thing that nuisance has been shooed away, huh? You were glaring at him the whole time, weren’t you, Lala?”

“You’re the one being a nuisance now...”

“Ooh, so you really do want to talk, just the two of you?”

“Shut it, stupid Ludo!” Lala Ruu shouted, her face bright red as she threw a wooden plate. However, Ludo Ruu deflected it with a rib bone, now clean of meat.

“You’d better turn fifteen soon. Now that Shin Ruu’s been in the top eight, he could start getting all sorts of marriage proposals coming his way, you know.”

“I said shut it! Idiot! Runt! Just go away!”

“Heh heh. Now, what should I have to eat next?”

As he spun the plate skillfully atop the bone, Ludo Ruu headed back toward the center of the plaza.

With an angry “Jeez!” Lala Ruu once again hugged her knees. And then, her blue eyes glanced at Shin Ruu. “Will you really get marriage proposals now that you made the top eight?”

“I-I don’t think so, and besides, I have no plans to accept any.”

“I see,” she replied, hiding her red face behind the arms hugging her knees. However, her eyes remained fixed on Shin Ruu.

Just what sort of expression was she wearing now? As he tried to imagine it, the feelings whirling in Shin Ruu’s heart grew all the more intense.

Group Performance: The Castle Town Incident

1

This incident occurred a little over three months ago, just a few days after the people of the forest's edge and the nobles of Genos worked together to expose the crimes of Count Cycloeus Turan and his brother Ciluel.

"This has certainly ended up being quite the unbelievable mess," Polarth lamented, standing at the room's entrance.

As he listened to the noble talk, Kamyua Yoshu was crawling about the room. Meanwhile, Leito watched over his mentor from a few steps behind.

They were in the castle town, in the manor of a noblewoman with ties to the house of Daleim. Apparently, it was officially known as the house of Viscount Alphan. Spread out atop a thick reddish-brown rug was the effective head of the house, Dame Mateela.

A noble lady who had taken her last breath.

The silver dagger she kept in her bedroom for protection had been stabbed deep into her ample left breast. As of this morning, her life of fifty-eight years had come to a close.

"To think that robbers would manage to break into this mansion... Why, I'm shocked to hear that there even are any thieves in the castle town to begin with! I myself was sleeping just two rooms over. If things had gone differently, it might have been my life that came to an end instead. Just imagining it is enough to send a chill down my spine."

"So, Lord Polarth, you were invited here to the Alphan manor for dinner, and ended up staying the night?"

"Indeed. My father and elder brother had difficulty dealing with Mateela, so such duties were always thrust upon me."

“Such duties...?”

“Though this is no place to be saying these things, Mateela was an excessively stern woman, making it quite tiring to try to converse with her. And she compounded that with a stubbornness that led her to always believe herself to be in the right, refusing to bend in her opinions regardless of whom she might have been dealing with.”

“Ah, I see,” Kamyua Yoshu replied as his tall figure stooped further down and continued to crawl along the floor. At that, Leito’s gaze shifted from his cloaked back to the noblewoman’s corpse.

She most certainly did not have a peaceful final expression. Her face, every bit as plump as Polarth’s, was twisted with anguish and regret. The dagger must have pierced all the way to her heart. As a result, her white nightgown was stained with a huge amount of blood. It was a truly gruesome death. And the corpse had suffered another even gorier wound. The noblewoman’s right hand was missing from the wrist down.

“Mateela wore the apatite ring that served as proof of her nobility on her right ring finger. That must have been what the thief was after,” Polarth remarked while taking care not to look inside the room. “As you can see, she had quite an ample figure. I recall her once mentioning with embarrassment that at some point it had grown stuck and she could no longer remove it.”

“I see. But if they were after the ring, then just cutting off a finger rather than the whole hand would have sufficed.”

“Ugh, regardless of whether it’s a finger or a hand, I want no part of it! May whatever fiend desecrated her corpse in such a manner meet a fitting end.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Kamyua Yoshu said with a nod, remaining kneeling as he moved over to the bed.

They were currently in Mateela’s bedroom. Right beside her corpse stood a huge bed, atop which was a dark red stain. Taking that into account, had she been stabbed while in bed and then fallen to the floor?

After carefully looking the bed over, he gave the red stain a scratch with his fingernail.

“Hmm... With this much blood loss, I suppose there was no need for doctors,” Kamyua Yoshu casually remarked, blowing the chunk of blood off of his nail. Even at a gruesome murder scene like this, he really was just the same as always.

Leito and Kamyua Yoshu had spent the previous night in the post town. In the near future, the aloof bodyguard was set to escort a noble named Welhide back to Banarm. In order to discuss the arrangements for that, he had been invited to the manor for noble visitors where Welhide was staying.

Deciding to stop in and say hello to Polarth before returning to the post town, they had paid a visit to the Alphan manor in the morning. But Leito never would have dreamed that they would come across such a commotion when they did. The manor’s servants and guards had been scrambling this way and that downstairs, without having even draped a cloth over the poor noblewoman’s remains. The pair of visitors had passed through the manor’s gates just moments after the gory incident was discovered.

Knowing no fear, Kamyua Yoshu left the bed and crawled over to the corpse. Then he poked at the lady’s plump arm and remarked, “Hmm, not much time has passed since her death.”

With a small sigh, Leito knelt down beside Kamyua Yoshu.

“What is it, Leito?”

“Would it be all right for me to touch the dame’s remains as well?”

“It’s not up to me to decide, but why?”

“Because I’m your apprentice.”

“Hmm. I can’t quite say I follow the logic.”

Constantly watching Kamyua Yoshu’s aloof grin out of the corner of his eye, Leito carefully reached out toward the corpse’s arm. It was girthy, with a significant amount of fat. Touching it, Leito could feel that it had lost its elasticity. But sure enough, beneath that he could sense a faint warmth remaining from when she was still alive.

The noblewoman’s soul must have remained here in this world all the way up

to the break of dawn. Pulling his hand back, Leito prayed in his heart that her spirit would find peace.

“Lord Polarth, would it be all right if I confirm some things about the surrounding circumstances?” Kamyua Yoshu asked, finally rising to his feet. “This morning, Lady Mateela’s granddaughter Lady Nicola visited this bedroom and discovered the corpse, correct?”

“Yes, so it seems.”

“And the bedroom window was left wide open, with no signs that the thief might be hiding in the room?”

“Indeed. And there has always been someone watching the room ever since, so surely a thief must have broken in through the window and exited the same way. It is a small mercy that Lady Nicola did not also encounter the fiend.”

“Hmm... And a servant was standing by in the antechamber from last night to this morning, so no one could have entered this bedroom from elsewhere within the house, yes?”

“Correct. That much is certain, as it is necessary to pass through the antechamber in order to reach this room from the hallway. Well, I suppose that wouldn’t be the case if the servant were to have drifted off, however.”

“But this bedroom is located on the second floor, so I can’t imagine it would be simple to sneak inside. From what I saw, there didn’t even seem to be any footholds on the wall.”

“Yet no other possibilities come to mind. If only she had locked the window before going to sleep, this never would have happened.”

At that, Kamyua Yoshu walked over to the window.

The wooden fixture opened wide toward the outside, and beyond it was a lush green garden and a brick wall. Because the top of the wall wasn’t very high, metal spikes were placed along the top. Without a good bit of preparation, it would surely be impossible to scale it in order to gain entry to the manor grounds.

Kamyua Yoshu pondered some more. “Hmm... Lady Nicola’s visit to this room

was around the time they rang the second bell of the morning?”

“Yes, that is what I was told.”

That was about when Kamyua Yoshu and Leito had arrived at the manor, and less than half an hour had passed since then. Caring nothing for the tragedy that had occurred, the morning sun shone brightly through the window.

“The road would have been packed with people.”

“Hmm?”

“By the second hour of the morning, the town is already bustling with activity. If you climb the wall of a manor at a time like that, you’re certain to catch some attention,” Kamyua Yoshu said with a grin as he strolled over to Polarth. “Lord Polarth, could you tell me once more about the state of affairs since last night? This might be a more complicated incident than it first appeared.”



Mateela had been in a bad mood ever since dinner. Polarth recounted that he felt bad for her family, having to put up with her grouchiness day in and day out.

At the time, her only family in the house of Alphan had been her two granddaughters. They were the first daughter of the previous head of the house, Tetia, and the second daughter, Nicola. Officially, Tetia was simply the eldest daughter of the house, and Mateela was her guardian. Tetia would eventually take a husband of appropriate lineage, and that person would officially inherit the title. According to the laws of the Western Kingdom of Selva, women could only temporarily be recognized as the head of a house.

“Not just anyone shall do to inherit the name of Viscount Alphan,” Mateela had a habit of saying frequently.

In the Western Kingdom, the rank of viscount was granted to offshoots from the houses of dukes and counts. The house of Alphan was one such offshoot from the house of Daleim... In fact, Mateela herself was the younger sister of the previous Count Daleim.

In other words, Mateela was Polarth’s great aunt. Because of that, even

though he was the second son of her parent house, he still had trouble handling the difficult-to-please noblewoman.

“Well, the house of Daleim itself only has a history of a hundred or so years, so I don’t see any reason to go about acting all puffed up. But whenever I said such things, she would lambaste me with the harshest lecture you can imagine, so last night I just behaved myself and ate my dinner.”

The dinner in question had involved quite the fine assortment. A dried karon milk and reten oil fried dish for the appetizer, a soup using lots of milk fat, a fuwano dish using thin slices of karon brisket, a vegetable dish dressed in mamaria vinegar, and a kimyuus torso stuffed with herbs and vegetables for the meat dish. The chefs certainly pulled out all the stops when a member of the house of Daleim was visiting.

“You took a wife from an offshoot of the house of Saturas two years back, did you not, Lord Polarth?” Mateela had asked as the dinner was coming to a close.

“Yes, from the bloodline of the current head of the house’s granduncle. She’s too good for someone such as myself.”

“It must be quite difficult to marry someone from the houses of Genos or Turan, even as a member of the main house of Daleim.”

“Indeed. Still, not forming ties to the house of Turan seems to have worked out for the best now.”

The house of Turan had lost its powerful leader, Cyclaeus, and was currently working feverishly to get back on its feet. And besides, if Polarth had taken a wife from the house of Turan instead, he surely would have found it difficult to assist Kamyua Yoshu in his plan. After all, they had stood alongside Duke Genos and the people of the forest’s edge in order to take Cyclaeus down.

When she heard Polarth’s words, Mateela had replied, “That’s true...” with a deep sigh.

Mateela was a talented woman who had served as the assistant head of the second largest place of study in all the castle town. Thanks to her bloodlines, combined with her success in that job, she had been granted the title of “dame.”

Because of her decent love of gourmet food, she had grown rather plump, but that only served to enhance the dignity of her overall appearance. On top of that, she had an extremely strict personality, and greatly valued discipline and morals. Secretly, Polarth found it quite difficult to imagine how she must have responded to the news of the fall of Count Turan.

“Lord Polarth, I’ve heard tell that you were a leading figure in those events. Might you be able to form a deeper connection to the house of Genos in the future?”

“Ah, no, that would be beyond the means of someone such as myself. My father and elder brother will be the ones to take steps in that regard.”

“You have such a great accomplishment to your name, and yet you would step aside?”

“Rather than stepping aside, I would say I’m currently enjoying the work of selling massive quantities of poitan in the post town. After all, that is a serious job linked directly to the prosperity of the house of Daleim.”

“I see. I had hoped that if you forged a new bond with the house of Genos, it could lead to a favorable introduction... It seems I will have to talk to the head of the house of Daleim directly.”

As he bit into the sweet baked fuwano brought out as the final dish, Polarth tilted his head. “Oh? My apologies for asking, but are you seeking an introduction for a marriage? Lady Tetia will surely be able to find a good match soon, so I don’t believe you have anything to worry about.”

“No... My worries are not for Tetia, but rather Nicola.”

There seemed to be a disquieted look in her eyes. As for her granddaughters, they just kept eating silently. The first daughter Tetia cast her gaze downward sadly, while the second daughter Nicola turned aside, looking uninterested.

“I wish to have the man who will be Nicola’s husband become the next head of this house. That is what I am thinking about, Lord Polarth...” Mateela stated in a voice as firm as stone.

“Do the laws of Selva allow for skipping over the first daughter and making the second daughter’s husband the heir?” Kamyua Yoshu casually asked as they walked down the brick hallway.

Polarth replied, “That would be difficult to pull off,” with a shrug of his round shoulders. “Lady Tetia is technically the inheritor of the rank, so I would imagine such a thing couldn’t be done lightly. The house of Alphan is the third most pedigreed lineage of those under the house of Daleim, after all.”

“Hmm. Then why did the famously strict Dame Mateela say she would do something so illogical? She valued discipline and proper morals greatly, didn’t she?”

“That is precisely why. Please keep this matter to yourself, but the first daughter Lady Tetia was a child born to the previous head of the house and a maid.”

“My, now that *is* interesting.”

The lanky Kamyua Yoshu and the rotund Polarth were huddled close together as they whispered back and forth. Despite one of them being a wanderer with blood from Mahyudra while the other was a noble, they seemed somehow alike... Or at least, Leito always thought so. And that was likely why they had been able to come together in order to bring down Cycлаeus.

“The wife of the previous lord had great difficulty conceiving a child. As a result, Lady Tetia was taken in as a legitimate child of the house despite being born of a maid, but ironically, the lady of the house ended up being with child a mere year later.”

“I see. So Lady Tetia and Lady Nicola are half-sisters with different mothers?”

“Indeed. Perhaps as a consequence, their personalities are complete opposites. Lady Tetia is neat, tidy, and sweet, a perfect example of ladylike comportment, while Lady Nicola is lively and boyish. Considering their lineages, the opposite really would seem more logical, wouldn’t it?”

“I see... So she judged Lady Tetia to be unfit to serve as the next head due to being the child of a maid? But officially, she retains the inheritance as of now?”

“That’s right. However, Mateela must have been quite displeased by that fact.

Hence her desire to pass the official title of head to Lady Nicola's husband instead."

"Hmm. It certainly is an unusual tale, considering that there should be just as much of Dame Mateela's blood in both of her granddaughters."

"Apparently, she had been vehemently opposed to Lady Tetia being accepted as a legitimate child to begin with. How truly unfortunate Lady Tetia is. She has been left atop a bed of nails ever since losing the backing of her father," Polarth stated, sighing empathetically and then finally coming to a stop.

They had reached the entrance to the manor. A number of guards were there, surrounding and questioning a young servant boy. When one of those guards noticed Polarth, he gave a salute.

"Good work there. Er, were you the servant in the antechamber of Mateela's bedroom last night?"

"Yes," the youth replied, his face completely pale as he nodded back. With a look from Polarth, Kamyua Yoshu stepped forward.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions too. I hear you spent the night in the antechamber between the hallway and the bedroom, never falling asleep. Is that the case?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"All night, with no sleep and nobody to relieve you? Sounds like a pretty tough job."

"The man who was meant to relieve me was laid up with a sudden fever. Nothing could be done about it, since it was so abrupt."

Now Leito understood why the youth was so pale-faced at the moment. The only way to get into the bedroom would require passing him in the antechamber. He would bear no responsibility if the murderer really had been a thief that came in through the window, but if that wasn't what happened... Well, he would have been in a position to harm the dame far more easily than anyone else could.

Paying no heed to the youth's distress, Kamyua Yoshu shot him a grin. "I see.

And then Lady Nicola visited in the morning, at which point the incident was discovered.”

“Right. That occurred just as the second morning bell was ringing. That was when Lady Mateela always awoke.”

“Oh, I see. Still, what business could there be to handle so early in the morning? Did Lady Nicola make a habit of visiting her grandmother’s bedroom for a greeting each morning?”

“No. I don’t believe she had ever done so in the past. And I didn’t ask her what business had brought her there.”

“Hmm...” Kamyua Yoshu pondered as he stroked his stubbly chin. “So nobody aside from Lady Nicola visited the bedroom between last night and this morning?”

“That is correct. After Lady Tetia departed late last night, not a single person visited.”

“Ah, so Lady Tetia stopped by the bedroom too?” Kamyua Yoshu very casually asked back.

“Yes,” the youth replied with a firm nod. “But that was last night. It was around an hour after everyone had headed to their bedrooms.”

“And how long did Lady Tetia spend in the dame’s bedroom?”

“I’m not certain, but I don’t believe it was a particularly long time...”

“How did Lady Tetia seem when exiting the bedroom?”

“She was heavily hanging her head, so I couldn’t tell. It is not permitted here at the Alphan manor to rudely stare at a noble’s face.”

“I see,” Kamyua Yoshu replied with a smile. “Well then, what about Lady Nicola? Did she come flying out of the bedroom upon discovering the corpse?”

“Well... Lady Nicola remained inside for a while. And she had to crawl back to the door when she left. She must have been left dumbfounded when confronted with Lady Mateela’s remains. That comes as no surprise, considering Lady Nicola is still only fifteen years old.”

“Yes, I see... By the way, was the dame’s blood on her clothing when she exited the bedroom?”

That question clearly caused the young servant’s face to turn even paler.

“Lady Nicola’s clothing was soaked with blood. So much that at first I feared she herself had been injured.”

“Oh?”

“But Lady Nicola could never do anything so gruesome! And besides, Lady Mateela’s ring and whole right hand are missing, and weren’t found anywhere in the bedroom!”

“Yes, yes. And stabbing a blade so deep wouldn’t be possible with her slender arms. After all, the dagger not only shattered a rib bone, but even made it all the way to the dame’s heart.”

The youth’s shoulders slumped with exhaustion.

Kamyua Yoshu said, “Thank you,” and then swiftly turned around to walk back down the hall.

As Polarth hurriedly caught up to the bodyguard, he questioned, “We came all this way to talk to him, and you’re already finished?”

“Yeah. That was all I wanted to know. Next, I’d like to hear what the young ladies of the house have to say.”

“Not that I particularly mind, but what exactly is your plan here?”

“I’m not planning anything. It’s just, doesn’t this whole incident seem terribly odd? The idea of a thief breaking into a noble’s manor early in the morning, harming her, and then disappearing like smoke sounds like something out of one of those mystery stories the minstrels tell.”

“Hmm. Well, in the stories, the culprit is generally someone unexpected,” Polarth replied, a bit of a doubtful look on his face. “You aren’t thinking that’s the case here, are you, Sir Kamyua?”

“Who can say? Still, I owe you a great debt, and this tragedy has befallen your relatives, so I’d like to put the best of my meager abilities toward seeking out the truth.”

“Hmm. But Sir Kamyua, do you not need to help guard Sir Asuta in the post town when the sun hits its peak? That would mean you only have a tiny bit of time left to solve the case.”

“That’s true. And I’d like to have at least enough time to eat a snack as well.”

During that exchange, they had arrived at the bedrooms belonging to the young ladies of the house. They would first speak to the one who discovered the crime, the second daughter Lady Nicola. Polarth reached out to knock on her door, only for it to open from the inside before he could do so.

“Huh?” the person who appeared from within muttered, standing there dumbfounded.

He was a young servant with a robust build. Though his attire was plain, he looked quite masculine. However, the blood had drained from his face, and his unease was clear in his brown eyes.

“M-My apologies, but do you have some sort of business with Lady Nicola?”

“Indeed. Could you inform her that Polarth is here to see her?”

“Ah, no, I’m nothing but a gardener... My apologies, but please ask the servant inside instead.”

The youth averted his gaze and tried to leave. However, Kamyua Yoshu called out to stop him. “Hold on. What business brought *you* to Lady Nicola’s room? Was she giving you some sort of instructions?”

“No. It’s just that I heard Lady Nicola had been the one to discover Dame Mateela’s corpse, so I came to check on her. I realize it’s beyond my station to do so, but I was just so terribly concerned...”

“I see. If you don’t mind, could you tell me your name?”

The youth stared back at Kamyua Yoshu with a look of open wariness. “My name is Zess. Please, excuse me...” With that, he swiftly departed.

As Polarth watched the youth’s burly back vanish from view, he remarked, “Ah, so that is Zess the gardener? Yes, I see...”

“What? You’ve heard of him before?”

“Indeed. If my memory is not mistaken, he is the son of the maid who attended the previous head of the house... In other words, he and Lady Tetia are half-siblings, sharing a mother.”

“Huh? Someone with that kind of history decided to remain here at the manor?”

“It was supposedly in the previous head’s will that he not be ousted. Though I cannot imagine that was something to be especially grateful for, considering his relationship with Mateela.”

The first daughter born to a maid, the second born to the proper wife, and the first daughter’s half-brother content with living as a manservant... Leito couldn’t help but feel the cast had finally been assembled for this tale of suspicion and doubt.

Having gotten himself back on track, Polarth knocked on the door, and a servant guided them through the antechamber into Nicola’s bedroom. The second they set foot inside, they were met with a harsh glare and similarly harsh words.

“What is it now?! Why won’t anyone just let me rest?! I’m sick of it!”

Nicola had turned fifteen this year and was a small girl with curled dark-brown hair. Though she had a face fit for a noble, she seemed to be rather severely irritated at the moment. In an attempt to assuage her, Polarth greeted her with a smile.

“My apologies, Lady Nicola. My friend here wishes to listen to what you have to say. Could you please lend your assistance in order to apprehend the fiendish thief?”

“Hmph! In that case, you should hurry up and chase after the culprit! What good is wandering around here at the manor?!”

“We won’t get anywhere if we rush out of the manor without any proper clues. We don’t even know if the thief fled outside to begin with,” Kamyua Yoshu interjected, at which point Nicola held her tongue with a look of hostility. The look in her eyes grew even sharper as she glared at him.

“Who are you? You almost look like those northerners I’ve heard tell of.”

“I’m a bodyguard by the name of Kamyua Yoshu. Lord Polarth should be able to vouch for me.”

“I don’t know anything about bodyguards or the like, but you certainly say some strange things. There’s no way the thief who did that to my grandmother would still be here in the manor.”

“That would normally be the case, but this doesn’t quite have the feel of an ordinary incident,” Kamyua Yoshu said with a smile, his droopy eyes narrowing. “Please, answer a few questions for me, if you would. When you came into the bedroom, was the dame atop her bed? Or was she on the floor?”

“She was on the floor, having breathed her last...”

“You remained in the bedroom for a while, and when you left your clothing was quite sullied from what I’m told. What were the circumstances behind that?”

“I have long since told the guards all about that,” Nicola retorted, the irritation now showing even more clearly on her small face. “I couldn’t believe that grandmother was truly dead and ended up clinging to her without thinking. It was no time for worrying about getting my clothes dirty. And once it fully sank in that she really was gone, the fear overcame me and left me weak in the knees... Feel free to laugh to your heart’s content at that unsightly image.”

“Ah, yes, I see. Still, just why exactly did the thief do something so gruesome as cutting off the dame’s right hand?”

“How should I know!” Nicola snapped back, fury blazing bright in her eyes. A look so intense that it was hard to believe it was coming from a noblewoman. It had to be a sign of just how thoroughly shaken she was right now.

Kamyua Yoshu didn’t seem thrown in the least, though, just giving a gentle smile and stating, “Ah, my apologies. Well then, this will be my final question. Why exactly did you visit the dame’s bedroom this morning?”

“I just wanted to tell her to retract that ridiculous thing she said yesterday...”

“Hmm, do you perhaps mean the matter involving the heir of the house?”

“That’s right. Regardless of bloodlines, Tetia is the heir, and that’s not

something that can just be overturned. I've got no interest in having that stuffy position forced upon me either."

Looking satisfied, Kamyua Yoshu gave a bow.

"My apologies on several fronts for bothering you when you're dealing with the tragic loss of a family member. Please, get your rest."

Just like before, he once again swiftly departed. As Nicola's furious gaze dug into their backs, the party left the bedroom behind them.

"Now then, next up is Lady Tetia," Kamyua Yoshu cheerfully declared, but that expectation wasn't met. Lady Tetia had collapsed from shock upon hearing the news of her grandmother's passing, and was still in bed.

"No helping that, I suppose. In that case, how about we head out front for a bit? I want to see how security outside was being handled too."

And yet, they were unable to gain any useful information on that front. After all, the violent act had occurred not late at night, but rather in the morning. By that time the guards on patrol had returned to the manor and hadn't noticed anything unusual.

However, there had been members of the militia dispatched to search the inside of the manor. Just as Kamyua Yoshu had stated, they'd sent a report stating that it would likely be impossible to sneak into the manor by scaling that wall in the morning.

Even if someone had slipped past the nighttime patrol, Mateela had been murdered just before two in the morning. If the culprit had then scaled the fence and escaped on the front side, obviously people would have noticed. And so, the lead investigator's conclusion was that it made sense to think there had been no intruder to begin with.

"Hmm. At this rate it seems the conclusion that shall be reached is that the servant keeping watch in the antechamber was the culprit," Polarth commented.

"That's true. Still, he wouldn't have been able to leave the antechamber. Could he truly have not only chopped off the dame's right hand without getting anything on himself, but also hidden it somewhere?" Kamyua said.

“Ah, I see. It isn’t as if he could have wandered about the manor in the morning all coated in blood... But then, just where exactly does that leave us?” Polarth questioned, tilting his head, only for one of the guards investigating the rear garden to come running over.

“Lord Polarth! We’ve discovered what we believe to be the dame’s right hand!”

“Huh?! Truly?!”

The party hurried to the rear garden, where they found another guard standing beyond the neatly trimmed bushes. The ground had been dug up at his feet, where an incredibly disturbing object was sitting atop a cloth. Polarth stopped some distance away, but Kamyua Yoshu and Leito hurried right over.

“Yes, it seems there’s no mistaking it...” It was a bloody hand, which had gone as pale as wax. And a ring with a shining yellow apatite gem was tightly stuck on the ring finger. “So it was buried? But it doesn’t look to have much dirt on it.”

“Right. It was buried wrapped in the cloth underneath it. As for the cloth itself, it seems to be a rather finely woven piece of fabric...”

“That’s true. Did it belong to the dame?”

With permission from the guards, Kamyua Yoshu wrapped the hand once more in the cloth.

It was semi-transparent, likely made of silk from Sym. Despite its fine gold hemming, it was soaked in blood and coated in dirt.

“Lord Polarth, do you recognize this fabric?”

“Please, no! Just looking upon someone’s blood is enough to cause me to feel faint!”

“But weren’t you fond of bloody karon meat, Lord Polarth?”

“That’s precisely why! Ugh, now I likely won’t be able to eat karon for some time...” Despite his protests, Polarth timidly peeked at the bundle Kamyua Yoshu was holding out from between his fingers. “Yes... That seems to be the shawl Mateela frequently wore. I believe she had it on during last night’s dinner.”

“Thank you. Still, this truly is awful...” Kamyua Yoshu remarked, his back to Polarth as he undid the bundle. And then, he said with amusement, “Oh... Leito, come look. There’s a rather deep wound on the palm.”

Just as Kamyua Yoshu had said, there were signs that the center of her palm had been roughly stabbed with a blade. She must have bled quite profusely from that wound too. After all, the palm and the base of the fingers were stained a deep red.

“Did she get this wound while trying to protect herself from a dagger coming at her chest?” Leito wondered.

“Who can say? That may be the case or it may not.” Kamyua Yoshu’s gaze suddenly shifted, and he called out to the nearby guard, “Excuse me, but what’s that building there?”

“The gardener said that was a shed for storing tools and firewood. We searched it right away but didn’t find anything suspicious.”

“The gardener... You mean that Zess man?”

“Yes, I believe that was his name.”

After entrusting the bloody bundle to the soldier once more, Kamyua Yoshu wandered over that way. It was a crude little wooden shack. The door wasn’t locked, so he casually pulled it open.

The inside was dimly lit and cluttered. It was packed with the sorts of things the guard had mentioned, and since it was just a single room there wasn’t anywhere a person could hide.

Kamyua Yoshu gave the space a once-over, and soon stepped over to the right wall, where a variety of large tools such as a scythe and a hoe were hanging. From among them, he picked up a strangely shaped two-pronged bladed tool.

“Leito, do you know what this is? They’re called pruning shears, meant for cutting tall branches.”

“Shears?”

“Yeah. When you push the handles together like so, these two blades cut

through whatever's in the middle. With shears this size, you could easily cut through a sturdy grigee branch."

Sure enough, those blades were each longer than a dagger, and they looked quite dangerous. As for the handles, they were likely about as long as Leito's arm. It could definitely be used to cut down high branches. As Kamyua Yoshu opened and closed it with both hands, he turned back toward the shack's entrance.

"There's a bit of dampness about the handles. Did someone use it this morning?"

One of the guards was standing at the entrance, suspiciously watching over Kamyua Yoshu's actions. However, since he needed to be polite to them as they were Polarth's guests, the man quickly nodded back. "Yes. Apparently, the gardener was sharpening the blades. He said that was part of his morning duties."

"I see. Sure enough, the scythe and hoe handles seem to be damp as well."

With that, Kamyua Yoshu returned the shears to the wall and exited the shack. Then, he turned his gaze to the left. The Alphan manor towered above them in that direction. There were windows lining the gray wall, and one of them was left open wide.

"It seems you can see the dame's bedroom from here."

"Indeed. But the gardener says he was in this shack the whole time and didn't notice anything."

"I see. Thank you very much."

Kamyua Yoshu then casually strolled back over to Polarth. Leito looked up at his teacher's face as he walked beside the man.

"You've solved the whole mystery, haven't you, Kamyua?"

"Hmm? Why do you think that?"

"It's what the look on your face tells me."

"You sure are quick-witted, Leito," Kamyua Yoshu remarked with a smile, his purple eyes shifting to look down at his apprentice. "What do you think? You've

seen and heard the same things I have, so have you been able to reach a conclusion of your own?"

"Well, based on what we've learned so far...I believe the culprit was Zess."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"I don't believe the servant would have had a way to keep the blood from getting on him, and I can't imagine Lady Nicola being able to thrust the dagger in so deep. That would leave someone forcing their way in through the window... And as you and the guards said, someone from inside the manor would've been able to do that a lot easier than an outsider who would have had to scale the walls."

"Right. But you still need a reason to single out Zess. Besides, I think it would be difficult to climb that wall with a gardener's strength."

"Yes, but what if Lady Nicola lowered down a rope from the bedroom? Then he could have climbed into the bedroom, murdered the dame with her own dagger, and cut off her hand with the tool from before. That would explain why those shears were wet and the hand was buried right near that shack."

"Hmm, I see. There's a certain consistency to your logic... In that case, why did Zess need to go out of his way to chop off the dame's hand, though?"

"Well...in order to desecrate the corpse? That Dame Mateela supposedly valued her authority as a noble quite highly. So taking away the ring that served as proof of her title would be a terrible humiliation for her."

"I see! Yes, that's certainly one way of looking at things."

Upon hearing that, Leito's shoulders slumped. "If that's your response, you must think differently, right, Kamyua?"

"Hmm? Yeah. I don't have everything lined up perfectly just yet, but, well, I suppose this is an exceptional situation."

"In that case, I must be wrong. Also, I can't see a reason for the first daughter's elder brother Zess and the second daughter Nicola to conspire together."

"I don't have any clues about that either. But there's no reason for us to give

up before learning the truth.”

“No, my thinking must be wrong.”

Shrugging, Kamyua Yoshu returned to Polarth, who was standing off to the side with nothing to do.

“Well then, shall we return to the manor? I’d like to trouble Lady Nicola, Lady Tetia, and Zess to gather in order to bring the truth to light.”

3

Six people had gathered in Tetia’s bedroom: Tetia, Nicola, Zess, Kamyua Yoshu, Polarth, and Leito.

This was their first time meeting the eldest daughter Tetia. She was sitting up in her bed, with her light reddish-brown hair falling down to her shoulders. She had a fainthearted look about her, as she had yet to recover from the shock of her grandmother’s death. Her face was as pale as a corpse.

Meanwhile, Nicola seemed to be in an even worse mood than before, and Zess had a look in his eyes like a swordsman itching to fight.

As he looked over the residents of the house of Alphan, Kamyua Yoshu said, “Now then... I’ve looked at this situation in my own particular way and pieced together what I believe to be the truth behind this incident. It may prove difficult to listen to, but I would appreciate hearing all of your opinions.”

“Are you planning on making ridiculous claims again, like how the thief may still be here in the manor?” Nicola harshly questioned.

“No,” Kamyua Yoshu answered with a shake of his head. “I don’t believe we can call the culprit behind this incident a thief any longer. After all, it’s disrespectful to refer to members of the noble Alphan bloodline as such.”

“Aha... Then you intend to make me out to be the villain here?” Nicola questioned, smiling with her mouth alone.

Zess trembled with anger, while Tetia remained as expressionless as a doll.

“Perish the thought. A sweet young lady such as yourself could never commit

such a violent act, Lady Nicola.”

“Stop messing around! What, are you calling Tetia the culprit?!”

“Not at all... Well, maybe you could say so. I’d say that the truth here is somewhat more complicated than that,” Kamyua Yoshu replied with a grin. What exactly had those mysterious purple eyes of his seen? At any rate, Leito just silently listened. “My first basic thought was to cast aside the hypothesis that the culprit was an outside intruder. I could only conclude that that couldn’t be the case, since it was clear from the state of Dame Mateela’s corpse that she was alive until morning. Climbing that wall during the second hour of the morning and escaping without any passersby seeing simply wouldn’t be possible. No, whoever the culprit was, they undoubtedly remained here in the manor.”

Everyone simply listened intently as he continued on.



“With that in mind, I came to the conclusion that the only ones who could have harmed Dame Mateela are the three people who set foot in her bedroom this morning. As the servant who kept watch through the night is seen as the most suspicious, he is currently under intense interrogation by the guards... However, I don’t believe that he is the culprit either.”

“Hmm, would that be because of the fact that he could not have hidden the hand the culprit cut off, nor could he have cleaned all the blood off himself?” Polarth questioned.

“Yeah.” Kamyua Yoshu nodded back. “Now, if he had an accomplice, that would no longer be the case. He could have lowered the weapon and the hand down to the ground below the window with a rope for an ally to hide. But I find that explanation highly unlikely.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Because he would have had no reason to carry out the plan in the morning. The other servants were already hard at work by the second hour of the morning, so there would be no telling when someone might come along and discover the crime. It would be utterly ridiculous to lower a rope out a window or summon an ally to the second floor bedroom while the sun was high in the sky. And it would also be wise to do the deed at night in order to make it look like the work of a thief. In actuality, the guards have already concluded that it wouldn’t be possible to climb over that wall during the morning.” After stopping for a single breath and a silent glance around the people gathered, Kamyua Yoshu continued. “If this crime had been planned out in advance, it absolutely would have been carried out at night. However, Mateela lost her life this morning instead. So perhaps that means it was a spontaneous crime that nobody planned for.”

“A spontaneous crime?”

“That’s right. I believe this was not a plot made in advance to injure the dame, but rather the end result of a series of unfortunate coincidences,” Kamyua Yoshu said, his gaze fixed on Nicola. “Now then, as you visited Mateela’s bedroom in the morning, you’re the second person who could have committed the crime, Lady Nicola. However, you couldn’t have thrust that dagger in so

deeply with those arms of yours... After all, the blade broke a rib and made it all the way to her heart. You would need the arm strength of someone such as Zess or myself to accomplish that.”

“Then are you saying I did it?” Zess questioned.

“Ah, no. After all, you wouldn’t have been able to scale the manor wall in the morning either. All you did was throw the pruning shears up into the window, right?” Zess froze in place with a look of terror. The blood had completely drained from his face. “Under Lady Nicola’s orders, you threw the shears from the rear garden into the bedroom on the second floor. And afterward, you had to take care of the bloody shears and the right hand wrapped in the shawl. The task must have eaten away at your very soul.”

“Oh, so it sounds like you wish to treat me as the culprit after all,” Nicola remarked with a chilly grin.

However, Kamyua Yoshu shook his head and said, “No. I believe you only cut off the corpse’s hand, Lady Nicola. Did you perhaps see Zess beside the shack when you opened the window to make it look like the work of a thief? That was when you would have asked him to provide the shears and handle the cleanup. For better or worse, things would have never grown so complicated if you hadn’t called for him.”

“What are you even saying?! Why would I cut off my own grandmother’s hand of all things?!”

“It was to save Lady Tetia, wasn’t it? To conceal evidence of her crimes.”

Now it was Nicola’s turn to freeze in place.

Kamyua Yoshu turned toward the bed. “Lady Tetia, you were the one to stab Dame Mateela in the chest with the dagger, weren’t you?”

Tetia slowly looked toward Kamyua Yoshu.

But just before she could utter a response, Nicola shouted, “Stop! Don’t say anything, Tetia!”

“You... You all realized what I did, didn’t you?” A single tear rolled down her face, as pale as a corpse. “Yes... I stabbed grandmother in the chest with her

dagger...”

“Tetia!”

“I am the one who murdered her. Nicola and Zess had nothing to do with it. I’m the only guilty party here...”

“No. It’s true that you stabbed her, but that was last night, correct? The dame lost her life after the break of dawn. You weren’t the one to kill her,” Kamyua Yoshu declared, his gaze shifting back toward Nicola. “The dame was stabbed in the chest by Lady Tetia. But it must have bounced off the bone and not penetrated all that deep. The dame did have a rather plump figure. At any rate, I believe that after Lady Tetia left, she tried to pull the dagger out and seriously injured her own right palm. There was a deep cut on the hand which was just recently found.”

No one dared interject.

“Then, in order to stop the bleeding, the dame wrapped a nearby shawl tightly around her hand. Perhaps she lost consciousness at that point, or maybe she simply lacked the strength to cry out due to the blood loss... Regardless, she was unable to summon the servant outside her door, and was left helpless and alone through the night.”

Nicola bit her lip while remaining silent.

In turn, Kamyua Yoshu shot her a gentle smile.

“Then morning rolled around and Lady Nicola visited her bedroom. I don’t know what happened between the two of you at that point, but the dame fell from her bed and perished. The impact of hitting the floor made the dagger that had been shallowly stuck in her chest plunge deeper, breaking a rib and making it all the way to her heart. Naturally, you went to summon the servant...but then, you knew Lady Tetia had visited the bedroom last night, didn’t you? Or perhaps the dame herself informed you of that fact this morning. At any rate, Lady Tetia’s crimes would have been exposed if you hadn’t intervened, so you had no choice but to devise a plan.”

“But why? Wouldn’t undoing the shawl wrapped around her hand serve to obscure when the injury had occurred?” Polarth chimed in, sounding rather

composed.

“No,” Kamyua Yoshu answered with a shake of his head. “That likely wouldn’t have done the trick. As it had been bound throughout the night, the dame’s hand would have become swollen. Lady Nicola needed to dispose of the entire hand in order to conceal that fact.”

“Hmm, the more I hear, the more astounding it all becomes! Were there perhaps signs of such swelling about the hand that was discovered a little while ago?”

“No. The area around the wound was so bloodied that I couldn’t confirm that fact.”

“Ugh, just hearing about it is enough to send a chill down my spine... Still, that leaves all of this as pure conjecture. Just how did you put everything together in order to reach such a conclusion?” Polarth questioned, looking confused.

With a relaxed smile, Kamyua Yoshu replied, “It wasn’t all that hard. The proof was on the bed.”

“The bed? You mean the one in Mateela’s bedroom?”

“Yes. There were some very clear bloodstains on top of it. Since the wound to her chest wasn’t all that serious, it must have all come from her palm. The blood that had been scattered around rather than pooled had dried enough that I could scrape it off with my finger. If it had all been from this morning, it wouldn’t be anywhere near that dry, now would it?” Kamyua Yoshu said, looking over the people present. “The dame’s corpse still retained a bit of warmth, so there’s no doubt that she died in the morning. And yet in spite of that, there was blood from before that on her bed. From the very beginning of my investigation, I went from person to person, asking questions in order to solve the mystery of why that might have been.”

Leito let out a little gasp, so small that nobody else could hear it.

He could clearly recall Kamyua Yoshu flicking the dried blood from his fingernail. And yet in spite of that, he had been unable to pick up on the same line of thinking.

“Lady Tetia was the only one to visit the dame’s bedroom last night. It had to

be either her or the servant in the antechamber who had caused the dame to bleed like that. But if the servant had been the culprit, he certainly would have finished her off during the night, which wouldn't lead to the current circumstances. Therefore, I reached the conclusion that it was Lady Tetia who stabbed her with the dagger, and Lady Nicola who tried to make that look like the work of a thief. So, what do you all think?"

Nicola didn't say so much as a word.

Staring intently at her half-sister, Tetia asked, "Nicola, is that true...? You and my brother Zess did that in order to protect me?"

"You didn't know anything about it, did you, Lady Tetia?" Kamyua Yoshu said.

"No... I had no idea what was going on when I heard about grandmother having been killed by a thief, and that her right hand had been removed. I was left wondering if something so strange could have truly happened, with someone just happening to break in and kill her after I had injured her last night..."

"Why exactly did you attack the dame?" Kamyua Yoshu questioned, causing even more tears to stream from Tetia's eyes.

"I... I visited grandmother's bedroom in order to discuss the matter of who would be the heir to the house of Alphan. Though it is true that my mother was a maid, I have been officially acknowledged by the authorities of Genos as a legitimate child. There was no way she could have twisted things to make Nicola the heir instead, so I wanted to ask her to please reconsider her position."

"But she refused to consider your request."

"That's right... Instead, she handed me that dagger and pressured me to kill myself..." Tetia's slender fingers were gripping her bedding tight. "'If only you weren't here, everything would be fine... Pay for the unforgivable crime your mother committed with your life...' That's what she told me. And she heaped such horrible abuse upon my mother... Before I realized it, I had thrust the dagger into her chest..."

"Is that what happened, Tetia?" Zess asked in a low, quiet voice. His eyes

were filled with terrible anguish. “If I had only known, I would have taken up a blade in your place. Why did that old hag hate us so much...?! If someone wasn’t born into a noble house, are they not allowed to wish for as much happiness as anyone else?!”

“There’s no helping that... Our mother accepted my noble father’s advances, after all...”

“Even so, grandmother had no right to abuse you like that! Our father is the one at fault for getting his maid pregnant!” Nicola shouted. There were tears streaming down her face now too. “I didn’t even want to inherit the house! I... I just wanted to marry Zess!” As she wailed, Nicola glared at Kamyua Yoshu with her teary eyes. “That’s why I went to grandmother’s bedroom, to try to persuade her! To tell her she should cast aside her stupid plans and let Tetia’s husband be the next head of the house!”

“You told the truth about that, I know. But why did that end in the dame losing her life?” Kamyua Yoshu asked in a gentle tone.

Nicola looked like she was suddenly overtaken by chills, wrapping her arms around her own body. “Grandmother was there atop the bed, grasping at me. ‘Tetia did this! That girl is a criminal, and now you can be the heir...’ Her face was pale, but she was grinning like a wild beast when she managed to grab me. I tried to flee, and she fell from the bed...”

Nicola looked like she was about to collapse. However, Zess supported her slender body without a moment’s delay.

As she looked upon her sister, Tetia whispered in a hoarse voice, “Nicola, Zess, I wanted you two to be together...so I decided to shoulder the name of house Alphan myself... But grandmother, she just wouldn’t permit it...”

“Grandmother was obsessed with status! Even though viscount is no great title in the first place! And yet she wanted to protect that title more than her own flesh and blood!”

Nicola and Tetia were both sobbing. Zess’s mouth was shut tight, as if to stop himself from crying too.

These three all just wanted to protect one another. Even as someone who

had never known what it was like to have a family, Leito could still imagine the anguish and sadness they must have felt.

“It would seem that my logic was right on the mark. The one to ultimately kill the dame was the third person present... The dame herself,” Kamyua Yoshu very calmly declared with a gentle smile.

4

“Goodness, what an unbelievable incident...” Polarth remarked as they left the Alphan manor.

As they passed through the front door, Kamyua Yoshu turned toward him.

“Lord Polarth, what do you intend to do with them?”

“Hmm? Have them tell the whole truth, of course. Pointing a blade at family and tricking the guards in order to hide that fact are both crimes in the eyes of Genos,” Polarth sternly replied. “Everyone should be judged fairly according to the law. All the facts must be properly conveyed, including that Mateela lost her life due to an unfortunate accident.”

“In that case, what will become of the house of Alphan?”

“Naturally, they shall be stripped of their rank. The folks in the capital would insist that a duke’s house would need to carry on no matter what, but when it comes to a rank such as viscount, it shall be left to Duke Genos alone to handle. All he’ll need to do is send a totos to deliver the news to the capital,” Polarth stated, then broke out in a light grin. “Well, that may turn out to be happy news for them, though. To someone who doesn’t want it, a title is nothing but a burden. In exchange for casting aside the honor and easy living that nobles enjoy, they have gained their freedom. Lady Tetia and the gardener will likely be imprisoned for a while, but once they have paid for their crimes, I believe I shall ask them to work for the house of Daleim.”

“Hmm. Then, what about Lady Nicola?”

“I believe I’ll ask her to work for me while she awaits the return of her sister and partner. Our head chef is looking for assistants at the moment, so perhaps she can serve in that role.”

“Oh, I see,” Kamyua Yoshu remarked with a smile. It looked carefree and natural, which was unusual for him. “Well then, I leave the rest up to you. And please give Duke Genos my regards.”

“Right! And next time, I shall invite you to my house!”

After saying farewell to Polarth, who waved to them as they left, Kamyua Yoshu and Leito passed through the gate.

The pair strolled along the stone-paved road running through the castle town side by side. The whole place seemed bright and lively, knowing nothing of the tragedy that had occurred at the Alphan manor.

“Um, there’s still one thing that I don’t quite understand...” Leito said as they walked.

With a “Hmm?” Kamyua Yoshu sent him a questioning look.

“Even with her lacking strength, Lady Nicola could have finished off the dame without dropping her from the bed, right? But you concluded that Lady Mateela lost her life due to her own carelessness. I can’t understand why.”

“I tried not to come into it with any sort of conclusion in mind. I was watching the shifts in Lady Nicola’s expression and actions the whole time that I was talking. The only reason I initially stated that she wasn’t the culprit was to make her let her guard down,” Kamyua Yoshu nonchalantly replied. “Still, I hadn’t expected her to be so skilled at hiding her emotions. She seemed to have a stronger will and nerves than most, but I didn’t think she was the coldhearted sort who would harm her own relatives. So I figured she was innocent despite the lack of proof on that point... If not, her soul will eventually be judged by the western god in our place.”

“I really can’t measure up to you, Kamyua...” Leito remarked with a deep sigh. “Even though I was right there beside you, seeing the same things, I just couldn’t reach the same conclusions. I’m sorry for being such an unworthy apprentice.”

“You’re being a bit dramatic there. Just how old are you, Leito?”

“You already know that. I’m eleven this year.”

“So young!” Kamyua Yoshu chuckled. “When I was eleven, I was just a quivering mess who knew nothing about how the world worked. You’re shockingly mature in comparison, Leito.”

“Just being mature isn’t enough, though. I want to be an adult already.”

“The years will pass you by regardless, so why not enjoy your youth to the fullest for now?” Kamyua Yoshu replied with a smile, patting Leito’s head with his large hand. That was rather unlike him too.

“Um, this just makes me feel even more like a kid...”

“At eleven years old, you absolutely are a kid. There’s no need to force yourself to be anything else.”

“Yes, and I suppose you’re thirty, Kamyua.”

“I’m twenty-nine! How awful, saying that when you know better!” Even as he complained, his hand remained fixed in place. The warmth helped his apprentice feel calmer. “Listen, Leito, it may be true that you’re my apprentice, but that’s just as a bodyguard. All I can teach you is stuff like how to swing a sword or ride a totos.”

“I know. I want to work hard to become someone like you, in my own way.”

“Why are you aiming to be someone like me?! I imagine if you told a hundred people that, every last one of them would be strongly opposed to it.”

“Well, then I’d be the hundred and first.”

With a strained grin, Kamyua patted Leito on the head a number of times and then finally removed his hand.

“It’s pretty much certain that a guy like me will end up dying a dog’s death. I think you’d be a lot happier trying for a more comfortable life.”

“Yes, Bartha of Masara warned me that you wouldn’t die a peaceful death.”

“Yup, and that’s only natural. It’s extremely important, how a person dies. No matter how blessed a life you live, if you end up hated by your family in the end, then it was all in vain, right?”

He must have been talking about Dame Mateela.

Was Mateela at fault for fixating on the title of viscount?

Or was it Tetia, for failing to restrain her emotions?

Perhaps Tetia's father for having a child with his maid?

Maybe even Tetia's mother for failing to reject her employer's advances?

That was beyond Leito's capabilities to discern.

"I'm still only eleven, so I can't really picture my ideal death... But I'd like to live a life that satisfies me, and accept whatever awaits me at the end."

"Hmm. It sure is scary, seeing an eleven year old think that far ahead..."

"You're just under thirty, Kamyua, so can you picture how you'll die?"

"Stop emphasizing thirty like that! Anyway...even if I die a dog's death, I'd want my soul to go to the western god alone as I laugh my head off like a fool," Kamyua Yoshu said while actually giving a foolish chuckle. He was staring off into the distance as if scrutinizing something. "You know, thinking back on it, it's possible that Mateela died a surprisingly happy death, believing that Lady Nicola would become the heir as she perished. It's those left behind who have to suffer."

"Is that why you won't have a child of your own, Kamyua?"

"Who can say?" Kamyua Yoshu chuckled. "Well, I don't think I'm ever going to feel the drive to have a kid at this point, but I'd be satisfied if I could at least see my beloved apprentice able to stand on his own as a bodyguard."

"I'll try my hardest to live up to your expectations."

"Yup, give it your all," Kamyua Yoshu remarked with a grin. "Now then, I figure we've got at least enough time left for a snack, so how about we hurry back to the post town?"

"Right."

Though they had been together for two years now, Leito still only partially understood Kamyua Yoshu. He traveled wherever he pleased, ignoring taboos and never worrying about the wrath of any god, earning both respect and scorn from a great many people along the way. So was he happy or not? Perhaps

Leito had remained by his side all this time out of a desire to learn the answer to that question.

Still, either way, I want to be like you, Kamyua, Leito thought to himself as he chased after his unusual master down the stone path.

Group Performance: Their Diverging Paths

Sometimes I wondered, just what exactly was Asuta Tsurumi to me?

If nothing else, Asuta was definitely a childhood friend who I was stuck with at this point. By which I don't mean anything more than that we had been close since we were young.

To expand on that a bit, it's apparently really common to get along well at a young age, but then become distant as you grow older. However, Asuta and I were just as close now as we had been as children.

So just what exactly was our relationship? Sometimes, when we were casually chatting together as we so often did, I couldn't help but ponder that question. Just what was Asuta Tsurumi to me, Reina Ubukata?



I had been friends with Asuta ever since we were young. In fact, we were so young that I can't even remember our first meeting clearly. However, we supposedly first became close when we were both three years old.

Though I had no memory of it, I had picked that fact up from the people around us. Between the ages of three and six, the Tsurumi family took care of me for part of each day. That was just how things worked out. The preschools in the area had all been full, so that wasn't an option. My mom had been reinstated at her old job too, so an ordinary preschool wouldn't have been enough anyway.

With that being the case, it had seemed like the only option would be to find a daycare a bit further out and enroll me there, but when Asuta's mother heard my mom grumbling about it, she offered to take me in instead.

Apparently, the two had met in the maternity ward at the hospital. My mom was highly decisive, with a personality that was almost mannish, while Asuta's mother was incredibly gentle, and perhaps they clicked so oddly well because they were such polar opposites.

At any rate, once they had agreed on that somewhat unusual plan, it had deepened their friendship even further. In later years my friends at school would always be shocked by how irrational my mom had been, but personally, I had no issues with the whole thing, since it meant I got to have this incredibly deep friendship with the Tsurumi family.

On the other hand, you had Asuta's house. It was connected to the eatery they ran, a place called the Tsurumi Restaurant, and it seemed they'd had no intention of putting him in preschool to begin with, so his childhood was a little out of the ordinary too. But the closest preschool was still a good distance away and hard to get to, plus his mother wanted to spend as much time as possible with her child, so that was that.

Asuta's mother had apparently said there wasn't that much of a difference handling one child or two, but later down the line my mom would comment, "There's no way that's true. You and Asuta-chan might have both been quiet kids and easy to handle, but doubling the number of children you're taking care of would absolutely make things more difficult. She was just so strong and kind that she made it look like nothing."

At any rate, I ended up spending most of my early childhood with Asuta. It was just me, Asuta, and his mother in the Tsurumi living room for over half of most days. Those were all happy memories for me. Asuta had an adorable face like a girl's, and his build wasn't all that different from mine, so it always felt perfectly natural, playing with him.

My clearest memory involved plush toys from a certain TV series starring a character with an anpan for a head. Perhaps because of their family business, the Tsurumi house was full of merchandise for the food-themed character. Though it would normally make sense to focus on the hero parts of the original picture books and anime, Asuta and I always used those plushes to run a pretend restaurant instead.

"Here's your hamburger steak!"

"Thanks! It's super yummy!"

Characters with katsudon-, onigiri-, and buffet-theming would chow down happily on hamburger steaks and omurice. Looking back on it now, it was

actually pretty surreal. But anyway, Asuta and I would have a good time putting on those little shows, and Asuta's mother always watched over us with a smile.

"This is disgusting! It's inedible! Get me your manager!" Occasionally, Asuta's father would come barging in when he was on break and add some chaos to that little world. Those were the only times a heroic battle between good and evil would unfold, with the two of us working together to beat the villain.

Aside from that, I could recall helping to catch the bugs that hung around the small kitchen garden Asuta's mother kept, sometimes taking trips to the park, and going to the pool during the summer.

When we went out, people mistook us for twins a lot, probably because we had such similar builds. I couldn't remember how Asuta's mother responded to questions about that, but we never really took note of them.

Those three happy years passed by in a flash, and the two of us started attending the local elementary school.

I can remember feeling lost at first, faced with this new environment with so many other children, but I adapted easily in a few months. I made plenty of friends I got along with and started having a good time at school. Asuta and I were in separate classes, but he seemed to be doing fine too.

Even so, I didn't end up growing apart from Asuta. Our houses were in the same neighborhood, so we would go to and from school together, and I played with him more than anyone else after school and on days off. Since we had spent over half of each day together up till then, he was the one I always wanted to have fun with.

But once we started elementary school, Asuta started helping out with the shop because his mother's health was failing.

It was some sort of illness with a difficult name, and she spent a lot of time in the hospital or sleeping around the house. The Tsurumi Restaurant was doing really well, so they were able to hire part-timers to help out all day, but they still came up short-handed, which meant Asuta had to pitch in.

Naturally, he just did simple stuff like clearing plates and washing dishes, but

that was still quite a bit of work. On Sundays, for example, he could only play for a few hours during the middle of the day and at night. Still, whenever I visited, Asuta looked really happy. And on days when his mother was doing better, we would all have some nice, relaxed fun together.

However, that only lasted for around a year. Early in the summer of our second year of elementary school, just before Asuta's eighth birthday, his mother passed away. Asuta cried throughout the entire funeral. My mom and I did too.

I felt terrible for Asuta. I had hardly ever seen him cry, so it was hard to watch him wailing like that. His father too. I couldn't see the man's tears because he was hanging his head the whole time, though. Just the thought that the two of them would never be able to speak to Asuta's mother ever again... Whenever I thought back to that day, it was difficult to recall how sad I was too.

Asuta hardly ever smiled for nearly a year after that. And even on the rare occasions that he did, it was never as bright or carefree as it had been before. But in the summer of our third year in elementary school, our families went to the beach together, and he finally seemed to be enjoying himself for the first time in forever. He had really pulled himself back together over the course of the previous year. I can remember even now that I was so overwhelmed with joy when I saw his bright smile again that I started crying and then leaped into the ocean in a fluster.

Our peaceful days continued to roll by and unsurprisingly we both ended up at the local middle school.

This was when the embarrassing period known as puberty hit us, and it naturally became difficult to maintain the sort of relationship we'd had up until that point. Even if it didn't matter to us, the people around us weren't so casual about it.

"Hey, you walked home with Tsurumi-kun from the next class over before, didn't you? Are you two dating?" I was asked.

"No, Asuta-chan's a childhood friend."

"Huh? When you're just childhood friends, you don't go home together in middle school, though."

That was how it went.

I didn't call him just a childhood friend, though, I always thought to myself.

But then, what exactly was my relationship with Asuta? Friends of the opposite sex? Somehow, that just didn't feel right. The closest feeling was siblings who were the same age, but we weren't related, so that didn't fit either. Regardless, Asuta was just as important to me as my actual family. But I couldn't find the right words to express that.

And so, the distance between us grew a bit.

However, that was just in school. We kept our conversations there to a minimum, and commuted to and from separately. And since calling one another by our first names alone seemed to be a no-no, we started consciously avoiding that. But it was all just because of the unavoidable circumstances we were forced into, and nothing truly changed between the two of us. The proof was that we both still acted the same as always with each other outside of school.

I also started helping out at the Tsurumi Restaurant around then, perhaps because it meant we could spend a bit more time together. Asuta had awakened to the joy of cooking at the age of ten, so he now wanted to help out at the shop regardless of any issues with being shorthanded. I would always lend a hand on either Saturday or Sunday as well, and spend the majority of the day with Asuta. Asuta's father accepted me without any issues, just the same as always.

During the summer, our families always went to the beach together each year.

My relationship with Asuta continued on, the same as always, with the addition of a feeling shared between the two of us that middle school was a bit of a pain.

Occasionally, I secretly struck back against the world at large. At the end of our first winter in middle school, when Valentine's rolled around, I made plans to give him hotcakes. Not as any sort of romantic gesture. I just wanted to give them to him, so that was what I was going to do. With my mind made up, I made a foolhardy charge into my house's kitchen for virtually the first time ever.

However, they didn't turn out right. Confused, I asked my mother, and she questioned back, "You didn't mess up with the amounts, did you?"

"Of course I didn't. I made them just like the instructions said."

"In that case, you've just got no sense for it," my mother very plainly stated. And then, she brought her face close to mine with an intense look in her eyes. "Let me just say, you were born my child, so there's something you need to accept. Me, my mother, my mother's mother, we were all disastrously bad at cooking."

"What, our whole bloodline is cursed?!"

"That's why I focused on my job. Fortunately, I met someone who *can* cook. Your father... Well, like they say, when one door closes, another one opens, so it's important to know when to give up."

As if I'll just give up! I thought to myself as I threw on a scarf and left the house.

At this point, I had no choice but to borrow Asuta's help. I packed up all the ingredients I had bought for this project into a bag, then hurried over to the Tsurumi house in high spirits.

"Huh? What is it? You're not scheduled to help out today, are you?"

The Tsurumi Restaurant had just finished up its lunch shift. Valentine's Day had happened to fall on a Sunday that year, which was why I had figured I had the time to set this whole grand plan of making hotcakes in motion.

"Well, I'm having trouble cooking hotcakes right. Could you take a look and see where I'm going wrong?"

"Hotcakes? You're seriously making *hotcakes*?!"

"Is that really how you want to respond?"

"I mean, you always insist that your specialty is eating the food, right?"

"That's because between you and your dad, I never have a chance to shine," I retorted, puffing up my cheeks.

"Okay, I get it already," Asuta replied with a strained grin. In the past he

always wore the same cheery, adorable smile, but as the years went by my childhood friend had become a little more cheeky and had a lot more expressions to show off. “Still, I’ve never made them myself, so I don’t know if I’ll be any help.”

“It’ll be fine. Look, the instructions are written on the package.”

“So how did you screw up, then?”

“I don’t know! That’s what I came to ask you!”

“Okay, okay. You’re fine using the home kitchen, right?”

Asuta wiped his hands on his apron, and together we headed into the back of the shop. After passing through a sliding door hidden behind a large clothing rack, we entered the Tsurumi house’s living room.

Asuta’s father was sitting there looking rather slovenly as he watched television, but when he saw me his eyes shot open wide. “Huh? What’re you doing here, Reina-chan? Were you scheduled to help out today?”

“No, I came to cook some hotcakes.”

“Ooh, hotcakes? It’s been decades since I’ve had those.”

“Huh? But I thought you weren’t fond of sweets,” I said.

“There’s no such thing as a food I won’t eat! Even balut or casu marzu, I’ll try it all!” He puffed out his chest with a big grin. No matter how old he got, Asuta’s father always did have a childish side to him.

“Okay, then how about I give it a try?” Asuta said.

I couldn’t have that. “Ah, hold on! There’s no point if you make them, Asuta-chan! I’ll do the cooking, you just tell me where I’m going wrong.”

“Huh? Well, I don’t mind if you do, but don’t burn down the house, okay?”

After giving my childhood friend a smack upside the head for going out of his way to annoy me, I got to work.

“So...first you add the egg and milk to the bowl and mix well,” he read off the box.

“Yeah. One egg and 140 milliliters of milk, right? I’ve read it so many times I

have it memorized.”

“Whoa, you even brought along the eggs and milk? Okay, so, next you add the hotcake mix, and mix well until the lumps are gone. After that, you just have to cook them. It sure is a simple recipe.”

“Yeah... So how do they end up so tasty? There must be some sort of secret to the hotcake mix, right?”

“Nah, it’s just flour, sugar, baking powder, and some salt for flavor. Add an egg and some milk, and it’s only natural that they would taste good,” Asuta’s father chimed in.

Asuta turned back toward the living room with a look of suspicion. “You sure are knowledgeable for someone who hasn’t had any in decades.”

“Hmm? Nah, that was just a shot in the dark. Making sweets isn’t my field of expertise, so don’t take it so seriously.”

Out of curiosity, we checked the ingredients listed on the package, and the only things it had in it aside from what Asuta’s father had mentioned were seasonings and coloring agents.

“It’s stuff like this that really gets to me...” Asuta muttered with a sulky look.

Chuckling at his comment, I went ahead and added the batter to the now-heated frying pan.

After three minutes had passed, air bubbles started rising to the surface, so I carefully flipped the cake over. The edge that had been up against the frying pan now had a nice brown color to it.

“Huh? It looks like it’s going just fine...”

“I don’t see how you could screw it up, honestly.”

“But when I made them at home, they got all burnt and black.”

“Did you fall asleep or something while you were cooking them?”

Had my concentration been the issue? Or maybe I really did screw up the amount of milk or something. When I flipped it onto the plate after three more minutes like the instructions said, it was a perfectly fine hotcake, no matter how

I looked at it.

“There’s still a chance it could be half-cooked, though,” I remarked, borrowing a fork and taking a bite. The simple taste of a hotcake with no syrup filled my mouth.

I had succeeded just fine.

“Let me see...” Asuta stated as he reached out, only for me to slap the back of his hand.

“You can’t, Asuta-chan! I’m fine on my own now, so go take it easy with your dad.”

“What, I don’t get any reward for helping out?” he grumbled as he headed back into the living room.

Tch! If this was how things were going to turn out, then I wish I could have just made them at home and surprised him.

I needed to present the finished results before the Tsurumi Restaurant reopened for business. I made enough hotcakes for two people with the remaining mix, decorated with whipped cream and chocolate sauce. I figured they could add the maple syrup based on their own preferences. I borrowed some plates, and loaded them up with the hotcakes.

“Sorry for the wait! They’re all done!”

I placed the plates on top of the tea table in the living room. The father and son, who didn’t look all that alike, both stared up at me in surprise.

“This is amazing. You seriously nailed it. So, can we eat them?” Asuta asked.

“Yeah, that’s why I made them. Dig in.”

“It’s not even my birthday, so I feel sorta guilty somehow.”

Neither Asuta nor his father were able to hide their bewilderment. They seemed to have no idea why an old friend like me would suddenly stop by and offer hotcakes.

“Um, just to be clear, let me say that today is Valentine’s Day.”

Instantly, a look of shock ran across their faces.

“D-Dad, it looks like it’s Valentine’s Day.”

“Hmm... I’m a Buddhist, so I don’t know anything about that. Does it have something to do with the Van Allen belts?”

“I don’t really know what that is, but I don’t think so.”

“I see. Well, those’re more of a doughnut shape than a hotcake one anyway.”

“That’s enough of the father-and-son comedy routine... Go ahead and eat them while they’re still warm, please.”

“Thanks for the food,” they said in unison.

“That’s tasty! I never knew hotcakes were this good!”

“Yup! This is delicious! I’ve still got a few hours of work left, but I’d love to have some alcohol to go with it.”

“What’s up with your sense of taste...? You’d want black tea or coffee to go with this, right?”

“We don’t have any here at the house anyway. Though I guess we could try some roasted green tea.”

With Asuta and his father raving about how good they were, the hotcakes vanished in a flash. It felt strange somehow, having such skilled chefs look so happy with something I had made. I added some syrup over the now-cooled hotcake I had made first, and it was really tasty too.

“That was good! You know, now that I think about it, this might be the first time I’ve actually had hotcakes.”

“Huh?! Are you serious, Asuta-chan?”

“Yeah. My mom liked Japanese-style sweets, and I never really got into the habit of eating sweet stuff she didn’t make.” Then, Asuta looked right at me and with the sort of bright smile he used to wear as a little kid. “It was as tasty as the rice flour dango and warabi mochi she used to make. Thanks, Reina.”

I couldn’t help but think that if Valentine’s Day let me see him smile like that, maybe it wasn’t so bad.

From that day forward, I started making stuff like cakes and cookies for

birthdays and Christmas, and at least when it came to sweets, I managed to overcome the curse of the Ubukata bloodline. However, I had no intention of telling my friends at school about any of that. I didn't want them giving me chilly looks about it, after all. I considered it an act of rebellion against the established order, but it was something I ultimately kept private.

School's fun, but this stuff can be a real pain.

There was just one thing I knew for certain: the feelings I had for Asuta couldn't possibly be romantic.

The years kept on rolling by after that, and Asuta grew like a weed. Still, compared to the other boys our age, he didn't have an especially strong build. In contrast, my own growth had come to a complete stop, and at some point he ended up about a head taller than me.

When we were in the third year of middle school and he was fifteen, his appearance steadily grew more manly. He had a gentle face that he got from his mother, and didn't do sports or anything like that either, so he wasn't too masculine. But sure enough, he was a man, and I was a woman.

But still, I knew that I could never have romantic feelings toward this precious childhood friend of mine.

Asuta was just as important to me as family. I wanted him to become a fine chef and live a happy life. If I had to say, it felt more like affection for a brother, and all I wanted was to keep watching over him.

"Oh, Asuta-chan."

I happened to run into Asuta one day on the way home in the winter of our third year in middle school, at the school's entrance.

Though I had slipped up and called him by his first name, fortunately nobody I knew was around at the time.

"It's rare to see you here at this time of day. What's going on?"

"Hmm? I was just talking to some people from class. The shop's closed for the day, so I figured it would be good to use the time for some socializing."

“Whoa, that sounded all businesslike, somehow!”

“Yeah, I’m a cold-blooded person by nature.”

That was just us joking around. Asuta was pretty much always working the shop after school and on days off, so he didn’t have many opportunities to connect with his classmates. However, he was rather sociable, so his school life was just as calm and peaceful as mine.

He was more stubborn than you might think from looking at him, and could get all worked up or hurt from talking to people, so I wouldn’t really call him any kind of social expert in the truest sense. But thanks to his natural positivity and friendliness, he got by just fine.

Asuta was probably more fond of people in general than most. He knew very well how much happiness people got from the love of others. And he knew the pain and sadness of losing that love too. It made him incredibly kind, and though he was a dummy who didn’t think about anything but cooking, he valued his connections with others.

“Hey, how about we head home together every now and then?” I suggested.

“Yeah, sure. We’re going the same way, so it’s only natural.”

And so, we passed through the school’s gate side by side.

Later, we would start doing this a couple times each month. Since we normally maintained an appropriate distance to avoid getting teased, I figured we could get away with at least this much.

“Ugh, it’s been getting colder,” Asuta said.

“True. I couldn’t manage without hand warmers.”

“Huh? You’ve been wimping out and using that stuff?”

“Of course I have. Us girls are more sensitive to the cold, you know,” I replied, pulling one of my hands out of my pocket with the disposable hand warmer I had been holding. “Want to share?”

“Hmm... Nah, I’m good. I’m not that sensitive to cold.”

“Okay.”

I secretly thought to myself that if this were a romantic comedy manga or drama, we would have ended up holding hands at this point.

“There are three months left till graduation, right?” I said.

“Yeah, but there are entrance exams before that.”

“Ugh, I hate hearing that term.”

“It should be easy for you. You’re smart.”

“Not that smart. I just work really hard all the time. I was studying all day today in the library, you know.”

Asuta had no response to that.

“You’re the smart one here, aren’t you, Asuta-chan? You’re trying to take a public school entrance exam without any test preparation.”

“That’s more what I’d call fighting with your back against the wall...”

“Well, I guess a chef may not have much use for stuff like academic credentials. But your dad said he could hire a new part-timer, so why don’t you just take him up on it for now at least?”

“It’s got nothing to do with how busy the shop is. I just don’t want to have less time to spend in the kitchen.” As I glanced sideways over at Asuta’s face, I found he looked a bit angry. “Besides, my old man decided all on his own that I should continue with my schooling. I didn’t even want to go to high school since I was planning on taking over the shop anyway.”

“He’s thinking it would be good for you to have lots of options for the future, isn’t he? I can’t say he’s wrong about that,” I told him, then adding, “Still, I can’t imagine you working anywhere but the Tsurumi Restaurant.”

“Right? It’s not like there’s anything wrong with having your life figured out by your third year in middle school, is there?” Asuta had a really childish look on his face at this point. Though his cheeks had slimmed a bit and his nose and jawline were getting a little sharper, making him appear to be a lot more mature, he looked like he was a kid again right now.

“Sounds like you really don’t want to go. But if you’re going to end up working in the Tsurumi Restaurant anyway, then spending three years in high school

shouldn't be such a big deal, right? It's not like the shop is going anywhere."

"But once you pass twenty, your brain cells start steadily dying off, don't they? So I want to study cooking as much as possible while my brain's at its best," Asuta said with a deep sigh. "I wouldn't have any problem with it if I was told to go to school when I hit thirty or forty instead."

His face was so tense and serious that I couldn't stop myself from laughing.

"You'd already be a great chef by that point, right? What would the point be in going to school then?"

"Maybe, but still..."

"You say some pretty crazy stuff sometimes, Asuta-chan," I remarked, chuckling for a while, but then I sighed. "Still, I guess we'll finally be separated after we graduate middle school."

"Hmm? It's not like we interact a whole lot at school anyway, so I figure it won't make that much of a difference."

"You think? I'd say it's a pretty big deal, going to different schools. I mean, we've been raised in the same environment for twelve years now, since we were three."

It wasn't even five in the afternoon yet, but the light was already growing dim. The December sky was overcast and gloomy, and it looked like it might start snowing. Maybe because this was such an in-between time of day, there were only a few people along the path to school, and they all looked like nothing but dark gray silhouettes from where we were walking.

Feeling strangely emotional, I stared up at Asuta's face and asked, "Hey, just what exactly are we?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"We've been together for twelve years and we're so close to each other's families that we're practically family ourselves... But we aren't, right? So what exactly do you call this relationship?"

"Well...you're my childhood friend, right?"

"Just childhood friends?"

“I wouldn’t say we’re ‘just’ friends any more than I’d say we’re ‘unjust’ friends,” Asuta quipped, scratching his head. “But I mean...you’re Reina.”

“That’s not really an answer, is it?”

“I can’t help it. I can’t think of any other way to explain what I mean,” Asuta said, furrowing his brow. Just as I was starting to have some slight regrets and worrying about whether I shouldn’t have brought this up, though, he continued, “Besides, it’s not like we’re going to be able to stay like this forever. Even if we get into the same high school, you’re sure to go on to college while I’ll be working at the Tsurumi Restaurant. Then you’ll find a job at some company, and if things go well you’ll get married and have kids, and you’ll have your hands full with your own life.”

“Yeah...”

“And if you and your hubby move overseas, we might never meet again. But you’ll still be my childhood friend Reina. It’s not like our childhood memories will disappear, after all.”

“H-Hey, aren’t you jumping ahead a bit too far there? I’ve got no plans of moving overseas right now.”

“I just went for the most extreme example so it’d be easier to understand. You’ve got a lot of hard work ahead of you to find a husband before you get to that point.”

I gave him a smack on the back of his head for that remark. But somehow, I felt a warmth filling me up inside.

“Right. No matter how far apart we may be, you’ll still be Asuta-chan, huh?”

“Yeah, and those memories wouldn’t disappear even if I wanted them too.”

“You want to get rid of them?! I’m hurt!”

“Of course not, you dummy.” It seemed like Asuta was embarrassed for some reason. Had my emotional state infected him at some point?

Thinking about how if we were in a romantic comedy, then this would be the part where I’d wrap my arm around his, I started to smile.

“It’d be great if you could get lucky and find someone to marry too. Right,

Asuta-chan?”

“Hmm. That sounds like it’ll be a lot of hard work too.”

“That’s not true at all. Sure, you’ve got this half-baked balance between manliness and cuteness, but if you managed to shake off one side or the other, the girls would probably be all over you.”

“Don’t go analyzing me! It hits a lot harder when it comes from my childhood friend!”

“Heh heh. I can’t imagine there being a girl out there who knows you better than I do, at least for now.”

Asuta scratched his head again, but maybe because it was so cold out, he soon stowed his hand back in his pocket. “This time of year sucks when you hate wearing gloves.”

It seemed that all the water he got on his hands while doing his job was pretty rough on them, so Asuta was always treating them with skin cream. But because of that, he said wearing gloves felt gross, and he remained barehanded even in the dead of winter.

I shoved a piping hot hand warmer into the coat pocket where his hand was now residing. “Allow me to share with my dear childhood friend,” I said.

“Your kindness tends to come at a steep price, though...”

“Yup. I think I’ll ask for some fillet tonkatsu.”

“That’s a *really* steep price!”

“I’m craving one of your hot meals. How about you treat me to one, and in exchange I’ll help you study?”

“If you drop the unpleasant repayment, then I suppose I could feed you...”

“Okay, let’s hurry back!”

Our paths were sure to diverge someday. However, this memory would last forever.

Holding onto that one final emotional thought, I, Reina Ubukata, walked side by side with my precious childhood friend on that December day at dusk.



Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the 19th volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

For this volume, the contents of each chapter ended up being clearly divided. We have a tea party for noblewomen, townsfolk being invited to the forest's edge, and lastly the second Ruu festival of the hunt. I hope that you'll enjoy each and every one of them. But with the cast changing each chapter like that, I had so many characters I couldn't fit them all in the character sheet.

In the previous volume, I needed to introduce the members of the Suun clan for the Group Performance, so I was worried that I might not have enough space, but it turned out not to be a problem. I'm really sorry for having so many characters in this work, though.

As for the Group Performance chapters this time around, they are "The Castle Town Incident" and "Their Diverging Paths." Both of these stories have a pretty different feel to them, with the former being a murder mystery, while the latter is set in the real world.

This is a bit of a digression, but I'm a big fan of mystery novels. My own reading history began with the works of Edogawa Ranpo in elementary school, and in the years since then, I've read a huge number of mystery stories. In fact, if I had any talent for coming up with tricks, I would have loved to become a mystery writer myself.

Unfortunately, that's a talent I just don't have. I've occasionally tried my hand at such works, but they just wouldn't come together. I can't help but think that concocting tricks just takes something special.

Still, I'm not the type of person who judges a mystery primarily on how great the tricks are. If I had to say, the thing that charms me the most is the famous detectives and the other characters in that vein who appear in those mysteries. When a work doesn't make you feel attached to the cast, no matter how superb

the trick or logic may be, I'm not particularly moved by it. On the other hand, if the characters are charming, that's a story I could read over and over again. Even in other genres, I'll read works I truly love five or six times.

That was a long digression, but "The Castle Town Incident" was a story born out of that love of mysteries. And let me just say as an excuse that it's more "mystery-styled" than a proper mystery.

The other thing I wanted to discuss was a certain character who appears in "The Castle Town Incident."

As I mentioned in the previous afterword, in the web novel version, the Group Performance stories were published immediately after the end of the Cyclaeus arc. It's only natural that some characters who were first introduced in the Group Performances for the web version ended up appearing earlier in the main story for the light novels instead.

To give an example, Lem Dom first appeared in a Group Performance story. It was the one where Ludo Ruu was the protagonist, "The Youngest Ruu Son's Little Adventure." Since it would have caused chaos if she had popped up in the main story first, I hurriedly put that story in volume fourteen of the novels so she could show up there.

As for the character in question this time around, she was less involved in the main plot than Lem Dom, so I didn't bother with all that. But as a result, readers of just the light novels may be surprised to learn that someone they probably thought of as just a minor background character had such a sad history behind her.

That character won't be all that active in the main story from here on out either. I can't speak to what might happen in the future, but for now she's just the kind of character who will pop up occasionally after having been forgotten for a while. I hope you'll all keep thinking fondly of her.

Moving on, the next volume is finally number twenty. I definitely feel the impact of that milestone, and I'm so grateful that I've had the opportunity to reach this point.

As for the contents, the sun god's revival festival will finally kick off, which synergizes well with the celebratory mood I'm feeling. I hope that you readers will enjoy it even more than usual too. And I will keep on writing tirelessly, working my hardest to make this a story that you will all want to read over and over again.

Let me finish by thanking everyone involved with the production of this book, and of course, all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you again in the next volume!

October 2019,

EDA



Bonus Short Story

In the Kitchen of the Silver Star

“Unbelievable! I am deeply, deeply disappointed in that Asuta man!” Shilly Rou groused after returning from the noblewomen’s tea party.

She was currently in the kitchen of The Silver Star, a restaurant in the castle town. One of her fellow apprentices, Tatumai, was out purchasing ingredients, leaving just Bozl and her master Varkas there to listen.

“Hmm, so he made a shoddy sweet, huh?” Bozl questioned.

“Was it ever!” Shilly Rou loudly replied. “I’ve never had such a miserable sweet before in my life! I’d expect even a little child to be able to make something better, no matter how young they are!”

“Sir Asuta truly prepared something that unsatisfactory?” Varkas questioned rather emotionlessly, but then gave a sad sigh. “It’s a terrible shame that I was unable to taste what sort of sweet it was personally.”

“Why would you say that?! There’s no point in eating something like that!”

“Regardless of how it turned out, it would serve to help me better understand Sir Asuta. He is most mysterious, and I wish to know more about him.”

Shilly Rou’s shoulders were trembling. Bozl gave Varkas a strained smile while also watching her out of the corner of his eye.

“Sir Varkas, you’ve been rather fixated on Sir Asuta lately. I think I can understand how that might make Shilly Rou feel somewhat out of sorts.”

“Is that so? Shilly Rou, I suspect that you have a very promising future ahead of you as a chef. As such, I can see no reason for you to feel that way.” Varkas’s words caused Shilly Rou to break out in a smile that positively glowed, but the master chef paid that no heed and continued on. “However, Sir Asuta is someone incredibly special to me. When I think of him, my heart starts pounding like a love-struck maiden.”

And just like that, Shilly Rou was left stamping her feet and grumbling “Uggghhh!” to herself.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Characters](#)

[Chapter 1: A Sweet Gathering of Noble Ladies](#)

[Chapter 2: Invitation to the Forest's Edge](#)

[Intermission: People of the North](#)

[Chapter 3: The Ruu Festival of the Hunt, Once Again](#)

[Intermezzo: At the Edge of the Banquet](#)

[Group Performance: The Castle Town Incident](#)

[Group Performance: Their Diverging Paths](#)

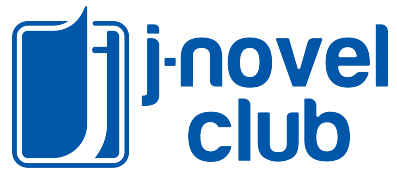
[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Textless Cover](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 19

by EDA

Translated by Gwendolyn Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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